

CHAPTER ONE  
IN THE SERVICE OF PRISONERS  
(September - December 1940)

When I return to Paris on the evening of August 15, its face has changed. He is both different and more like himself. His deeper soul has become more apparent. I realized this as soon as I arrived at the Gare Montparnasse. But it was in the days that followed that the contrasts became most apparent.

My mother greets me on the doorstep of our apartment, where nothing has moved. I hug her as if she'd escaped an earthquake and ask her how the Germans got in.

- As calmly as possible," she said. Paris has been declared an open city. So there's been no street fighting or devastation. We didn't hear a single shot. We did, however, experience a few hours of anguish. Euphrasie and I stayed at home, with the blinds closed. We heard that German troops were marching down certain avenues, but we saw nothing.

I breathe thinking about what happened in Warsaw and Dunkirk.

- By the way," she adds, "a few days ago I received a phone call from Suzanne Abetz. She asked me where you were. I told her I didn't know, that I hadn't heard from you since you left Bourges. She said, "We'll look into it. If he's a prisoner, Otto will see to it that he's released. I asked her not to. Was I wrong?

- You did the right thing. If he had intervened on my behalf, I wouldn't have accepted it. You see, it's much better this way,

since I've freed myself. Where is he now?

- Otto? I don't know exactly. I think he's at the embassy. You'll have to thank them anyway; Suzanne was indeed touching.

My first outing is to visit a barracks on Boulevard Bessières to see if it's empty, as I have an idea in mind.

A few days later, after making an appointment, I turned up at Rue de Lille. As soon as he sees me, Abetz comes to meet me. His face was serious, but his gaze warm.

- What a joy to find you safe and sound," he says. I try to get back in touch with my Parisian friends. Unfortunately, some of them are dead and many are absent. Do you remember General von Arnim?

- The president of the *Deutsch Französische Gesellschaft* in Berlin?

- Yes. He was killed in France a few days before the armistice.

I don't know what to say. This descendant of the brother of Bettina von Brentano, Goethe's old friend, was a cultured and sensitive man. It was he who chaired the lecture I gave at Hildebrandtstrasse on November 10, 1938.

- What about you?

- Me? The Führer sent me to Paris, with ambassadorial rank, but without giving me precise instructions. I wondered what could be the reasons for his choice. I came to the conclusion that there could only be two: either to inflict humiliation on the French, by forcing them to bow to a man they had expelled from Paris a few days before the declaration of war, on the pretext that he was a spy. Can you believe it? Me, a spy? When I can't even recognize the ranks in the German army! Or, considering that I've devoted my whole life to Franco-German rapprochement since...

- Since Good Friday 1918," I say with a smile.

- Yes, it was. I thought he had sent me here to lay the foundations for a peace of reconciliation. Finally, I said to myself: faced with these two hypotheses, since I've ruled out the first, i.e. humiliation, I'm left with the second: to work for reconciliation.

- But what does the Führer himself want? Because, forgive me for saying so, it's mainly up to him.

- Frankly, I don't know. In Germany, very large sections of the population are in favor of a Franco-German entente. They deplore the war and are pleased that it is over so quickly, with

very few casualties, so that it will not be followed by a long procession of hatred and grief. But Germany is a dictatorship. Hitler, and Hitler alone, decides everything. But there are a number of men around him who think otherwise. They want a retaliatory peace, a Treaty of Versailles in reverse, which will crush France and expel it for centuries from the concert of great nations.

"The Führer, for his part, has not yet made up his mind. He hesitates between two parties, with a marked preference for an alliance with England. What he wouldn't give to have peace with London! But then, all the consequences of the lost war would fall on France. I've heard Hitler say on several occasions: "Whatever the outcome of the conflict, someone will have to pay for it! I fervently hope it won't be you. To achieve what I hope for - that is, a peace of reconciliation between France and Germany - I have to play a very tight game: I must, as it were, force the Führer's hand, making him understand that Germany's interest lies neither in an alliance with England, which will always be the enemy of the continent, nor in a peace of vengeance, which will generate new conflicts, but in a loyal and lasting understanding with France.

If I hadn't known Abetz for years, and if I hadn't witnessed time and again the ardor of his convictions and sincerity, I might think he was trying to suborn me. But this thought doesn't even cross my mind, as it's so inconsistent with my opinion of him. Admittedly - like myself - he has his faults, and I'm not unaware of them: his mind is a little foggy, and he has a certain propensity for mistaking his desires for realities. But he is a man of fundamental goodness, a courageous spirit, who supplements the clarity of his intelligence with the lucidity of his heart. What he's just told me isn't confusing at all: it corresponds to my own apprehensions.

- Forcing Hitler's hand, I can't help noticing, seems difficult.

- Naturally, I won't be able to do this without the help of my French friends. They need to understand the situation in which they find themselves. That's why I thought you yourself...

He goes to his desk and takes out a basket leaf.

- We made inquiries to find out where you were. When we learned that you were in Voves, I telegraphed my deputy, Councillor Schleier, in Berlin, asking him to secure your release.

I am pleased to say that this was successful. Here, read...

I glance at the paper he's handing me. It reads:

*For Schleier*

*Learns that Jacques Benoist-Méchin is in prison camp I, Sème Compagnie, in Voves, near Chartres. Prayer for release, as important for Pétain liaison.*

*Abetz*

I think I'm in for a shock.

- Let me stop you right there: there's been a misunderstanding. If I had owed you my release, I would have started by thanking you. But that's not the case. The Voves *Frontstalag* was disbanded on the eve of my departure because there was virtually no one left there. This telegram from the embassy must never have reached it. In any case, I never heard anything about it. I freed myself. The reason I gave was to continue my studies. The camp commandant misunderstood me.

I take out a certificate from my wallet, confirming what I've just told him.

*Voves, 13.8.40.*

*Prisoner of war Benoist-Méchin, Jacques, has been placed on leave until further notice to carry out his duties at the Université de Paris. He has been ordered to report to the Paris Kommandantur on the first of each month. All departments are asked to let him pass.*

*The Arms Commander  
Le Commandant de Camp*

*(Signed) :  
Unreadable.  
Lieutenant.*

*Service  
27.801*

Abetz reads these lines carefully, running his hand through his hair.

- I don't understand it anymore...

- Here's my card from the Paris Kommandantur, where I have to report at regular intervals," I say, handing her a small rectangle

of gray-blue cardboard. Notice that it's erroneously marked "Writer-Professor". I've never been a teacher and don't intend to become one. My status is that of "prisoner of war on captivity leave". As such, I'm not allowed to cross the demarcation line. Besides, I don't mind. I have no family there and wouldn't know what to do.

- And yet I thought you were on very good terms with Marshal Pétain?

On very good terms! Goodness me! I thought so too. I'd only have to show him the letter the Maréchal wrote to me in Cosne on June 26th to open his eyes. But I don't have it with me, and besides, if I did, I don't think I'd show it to him.

- The Marshal?" I said, shrugging my shoulders. "He's got far too much to do to remember me...

- Ah! I thought...

- I'd like to thank you for your contribution. But you see, it would have been much better if things had turned out differently. As a French POW, I wouldn't have agreed to be released at the request of the German Embassy.

- Would you have refused?

- Yes.

- Why do you ask? You've known me a long time.

- Of course. But don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way. Given the turn of events and the position you occupy, it was impossible for me to be in your debt. I wouldn't have felt free...

- But you're still a prisoner, judging by your papers. Does that suit you?

- I'm glad it is. I'm glad that's the case. I still consider myself mobilized in the service of prisoners. I got out of my camp. Others, less fortunate, are still behind barbed wire. I'd like to help them...

I tell him briefly what I've done in Voves. I explained to him that my dearest wish would be to continue this work in Paris, not on a local but on a national level.

- With the experience I've gained in my camp, I think I'll be able to do it. I'd like to re-form a work team similar to the one I had there. Twenty or so active, dedicated comrades. I've even spotted a barracks on Boulevard Bessières where we could set up shop. It's empty. All we'd have to do is requisition it.

- It won't be as easy as you think," says Abetz, who has

listened to me so far without interrupting.

- Why?

- Because the military authorities are in the process of transferring all the prisoners of war still in France to Germany.

Ah, the unfortunates! I'm bitterly disappointed. Will my project be doomed before it sees the light of day?

- But there must be something we can do.

- I don't know," replies Abetz, shaking his head. I'll find out. I'll phone you next week.

I took the metro to the embassy - it runs slowly, but still works - so I didn't see much of the city. On the way back, I decided to walk.

There's a strange atmosphere in town. The streets are virtually empty. Not a cab, not a bus, not a private car. French traffic wardens regulate the non-existent traffic. Only a few cyclists ply the roads and a few pedestrians stroll the sidewalks. The factitious agitation and 1 kind of feverishness that used to animate the streets of the capital have disappeared. All is calm and quiet. A city in recovery! What a relief to see that it's unharmed. It has the moving features of someone who has escaped serious danger.

But as I cross the Pont de la Concorde and enter the square, whose harmonious proportions are made clearer by the fact that it's empty, I see something that gives me a real shock: swastika flags flying over the Ministry of the Navy!

I've never liked this emblem, but here it horrifies me. It's not a European flag: there's something cruelly foreign, Chinese, Asian about it, with its big black spider in the middle, which I've never been able to equate with a sun wheel. This emblem has no place here. I've seen it many times in Germany. It left me indifferent. But in Paris, there's something outrageous about its presence. It offers a strident contrast with Gabriel's palaces (admittedly, the only flag that would suit them perfectly would be the white flag with fleurs-de-lis). You'd rather not see it, erase it from your memory. Fortunately, they are few and far between.

On the other hand, the avenues and the Place de l'Opéra are littered with signposts in German. But it's not so bad.

It's especially at night that the city takes on an extraordinary beauty, offering an image of itself that we'll never see again -

especially on moonlit nights, when all the streetlamps are out because of the blackout. Then all the monuments emerge from the shadows and take on their full value. They look like drawings by Piranesi or Hubert Robert. Spaces and perspectives unfold without hindrance, and you realize to what extent Paris is the heir to Rome.

A few days later, the telephone rang. It must be Abetz. I'm happy to see that he's keeping his promise and hasn't taken offence at some of the things I've said (especially when I told him I didn't want to be his debtor). I pick up the receiver. A gruff voice calls out to me.

- *Yesterday Propagandastaffel!*

I don't know what it is. But the person talking to me looks very unhappy. She tells me, in a commanding tone, that "these gentlemen wish to speak to me" and that I must be at the Hôtel Scribe this evening at 8 o'clock. This is not an invitation: it's an order.

What do they want from me? I'm worried. I don't want to be sent back behind barbed wire. What also puzzles me is the time of the appointment. Eight o'clock! Let's hope it's not for dinner...

When I arrive at the Scribe Hotel, I inform the receptionist of my presence. He goes to take a look at the restaurant. I don't think much of it. He comes back and tells me:

- Wait in the hall. These gentlemen haven't finished dinner yet.

That's the spirit! But since I haven't eaten anything, as a precaution, I'm vaguely hungry. Rather sinister ideas are running through my head. What could they want with me? The wait goes on for half an hour, then an hour. These gentlemen are having a field day! I'm starting to get worried.

Finally, I see six men in *feldgrau* suits emerge from the restaurant. They walk towards me with a grim look on their faces. What have I done to them? The oldest of them asks my name. Then he sits down with his colleagues around a small round table and orders six cognacs. I note with equal pleasure and displeasure that they didn't ask me if I wanted one.

There's a heavy silence, during which I watch them on the sly. Apart from one of them, who doesn't seem so unsympathetic, they all strike me as a bit of a lout. Finally, the oldest one speaks

to me:

- We're faced with a delicate, even serious problem," he says.

It's off to a good start! I feel like I'm going to be subjected to a real interrogation.

- We've asked you here because you need to know...

Know what? I'd rather not ask.

- How do you get rid of Mr Sacha Guitry?

You've got to be kidding me! All my anxiety vanished in one fell swoop.

- Gentlemen, I don't quite understand your question, and even less why you're asking it of me. But since you're seeking my advice, I'll start by asking you: why do you want to get rid of Sacha Guitry? He's a man of great talent...

- *Jawohl!* But he's determined to become the Führer of French theater. He overwhelms us with his demands. When we throw him out, he comes in through the window. He's so obstinate and talks so much that he prevents us from working.

I can hardly suppress a giggle. It's all the more comical because the people I'm talking to now look almost sheepish. They seem to be begging me to deliver them from a plague. I put on my most serious face and reply:

- The problem is indeed a serious one. I don't know how you're going to solve it. You see, you committed an imprudence; you took Paris. In other words, the Arc de Triomphe, the Obelisk, the Sacré-Coeur, the Eiffel Tower. But M. Sacha Guitry is part of Paris, just like the monuments I've just mentioned. He is himself a Parisian monument. There's only one way to get rid of him...

- Which one?" they ask, their eyes tense.

- Evacuate Paris.

- How? *Was ? Evakuiren...*

They look at each other without understanding.

- That's hardly possible!

I see they have no sense of humor. But since they kept me waiting for over an hour and didn't even offer me a brandy, I'm going to make fun of them.

- So, I don't know...

- It's that he's breaking our ears, preventing us from working...

- But it must be nice, right? He's a delightful conversationalist...

I feel I've gone a little too far. I've touched the sacrosanct laws



of work. I see a dangerous gleam in one of their eyes. He's beginning to realize that I'm taking them for a ride.

- Mind you, I understand your situation. I sympathize.

That's better. I think for a long moment. Then I tell them, in the sententious tone of a *Privatdozent*:

- Since you think it's impossible to evacuate Paris, perhaps there's another solution.

- Which one?" they ask in anxious tones.

- Mr. Sacha Guitry is a cinema enthusiast. Finance a film for him. But make one condition: the script must be set in Marseille or North Africa...

- It would be too expensive.

- Let's say I didn't say anything...

They look overwhelmed. I wonder what Sasha could have said to terrorize them like that.

- And then it's just for a while, they moan. After that, he'll be back.

- No. He's not coming back.

- How so?

- Because when he finishes his first film, you'll finance a second. This can go on until the end of the war.

Silence.

- Believe me, gentlemen, *I* can't think of a better piece of advice.

With these strong words, I quickly slipped away, without giving them time to come to their senses.

Two days later, my phone rings again. I hope it's not the *Propagandastaffel* coming to ask me, this time, how to get rid of Bernard Grasset, on the pretext that he wants to become the Führer of French publishing! But no: it's Mr. Roger Seydoux, the General Secretary of the Ecole des Sciences Politiques. He asks me to become a professor at his institution, and offers me a course on the history of Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna. I assured him that I didn't have what it took, but he insisted, and asked me to drop by rue Saint-Guillaume to talk to the director, M. Tirard. He was so kind that I finally agreed".

How strange life is! M. Tirard was President of the High Interallied Commission in the Rhineland Territories, when I was doing my military service in Wiesbaden and the Buhr. It was he who uttered the memorable phrase: "From now on, the Rhineland

and the Ruhr will be totally separated from the rest of Germany! What does he think today - if he remembers at all?

And then there's something else that strikes me as surprising.

When I was last in Voves, and the camp commandant asked me: "And don't you want to go home? Now that all my comrades have been freed, I'd like to leave too. "But what reason could you give?" "The truth is, it's the simplest: to continue my studies." He stared at me from head to toe and, noting my age, concluded that I shouldn't be a student, but a teacher. Hence the erroneous inscription on my card: "Writer, *teacher*".

Teacher! I'd never been one and never thought I would be. I was too aware of my ignorance and lack of teaching skills. And then, all of a sudden, someone insisted that I become one. So the Voves arms commander wasn't mistaken: he'd only been one step ahead of events! This realization makes me slightly dizzy. I feel as if I'm moving along a road over which I have no control.

Finally - why not say so? - I have no means of subsistence, apart from the royalties I receive from the first two volumes of my *History of the German Army* (which, incidentally, brought me the setbacks we all know about). However, I have just received a message from my publisher in Berlin, who has undertaken to publish this work in German, informing me that while the first volume has appeared without difficulty<sup>1</sup>, the Great German State Ma, or has just forbidden publication of the second. As a result, both volumes are to be withdrawn from sale. The reason given is: "Too exciting to be read in wartime" . What a compliment! I would have thought that in wartime, nothing could be more exciting than war itself! It's true that, written at the height of independence, my book contains scenes - notably the pages relating to Rohm and the "night of the long knives" - that the Reich's leaders might not wish to be made public!

But this ban - flattering though it may be - has serious disadvantages. Since my book is banned in Germany, it's quite possible that the German military authorities will do the same in France. In that case, I'll have nothing left, and a professorship at Sciences Po will be welcome.

So off I go to rue Saint-Guillaume, where I have a long talk with Messrs Tirard and Seydoux. We come to an agreement. But I have my doubts: how am I going to carry out this difficult task? I go to see André Siegfried ■ for whom I have the highest regard.

I tell him of my misgivings. He reassures me and in turn insists that I accept the chair I've been offered. So the die is cast: I'll be a professor, since my project on prisoners doesn't seem likely to come to fruition. Classes start in January.

But then, around November 15, another phone call called everything into question. It was from Georges Scapini, the member of parliament for Paris, whom I knew well from his days with the France-Germany Committee, where he and Jean Goy represented the Union Nationale des Combattants. He invited me to lunch at his apartment on rue Cortambert. There I met a charming young woman, Princess Dadiani, who acted as his secretary, and the faithful Ahmed, a young Algerian on whose shoulder he leaned to walk. The deputy of Paris is 100% blind, following a wound received during the 14-18 war.

- The Marshal has just asked me to look after the prisoners of war and study all measures likely to speed up their return," he says. Would you like to help me? We're going to set up a diplomatic delegation in Berlin to liaise with the I'0 K W. The Marshal would be happy to have you head it up.

- The Marshal? He told you himself?

- Yes. Does that surprise you?

- A little.

- Why is that? What you did in Voves came back to his ears. He was impressed.

- Who could have told him? No one knows.

- General Huntziger\*, I believe. I heard about it from Ambassador Abetz. He, too, thinks you're the right man for the job. This is important, because 1 installation of the delegation in Berlin cannot take place without his agreement. So, do you accept?

How can I refuse anything to Scapini, who is one of the sharpest and most sensitive men I know? His blindness has further refined his intelligence and endowed him with a kind of sixth sense, that of understanding.

I tell him about my experiences "on the job", the nature of my relations with the Chartres Kommandantur, and the methods I think should be applied. We agree on everything. However, I confess to him that something is bothering me. It's the move to Berlin, where we'll be cut off from our comrades. I describe to

him in broad strokes how I had conceived the whole thing: requisition the barracks on Boulevard Bessières, set up a small work team, avoid getting bogged down in red tape, don't submit individual applications but proceed by category. In short, Voves on a grander scale. All the working schemes are in my head.

I must have been convincing, because Scapini is delighted. He's walking up and down his office without the aid of his cane and without bumping into the furniture, which strikes me as extraordinary. You'd never think he'd lost his sight. However, he confirms what Abetz has already hinted to me: in the past month, 1'0 K.H. has liquidated all *Frontstalags*, and virtually all French prisoners of war have been taken to Germany. That's why it's vital that the delegation's headquarters are in Berlin. It's the only way to be in direct and permanent contact with the highest levels of the German military administration. Since there's no other way, I'll do it. It's better than nothing. We can't abandon our prisoners I Even though I'm on "captivity leave", aren't I still one of them?

When I leave rue Cortambert, I'm filled with a kind of inner jubilation. I feel like I've finally found the path I've been groping for since my return to Paris. Our departure is set for the first half of December. I don't have a minute to lose if I want to be ready in time. The asphalt seems to be burning my soles.

Time to run to rue Saint-Guillaume to tell Roger Seydoux that I'd been appointed to Berlin, that my lecture on Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna would have to be postponed, but that I'd be happy to do it when the prisoners returned; to find an assistant to help me put together our work team (it would be Jean Lombard, a young geologist-explorer who had drawn up the first geological map of Africa, and who had been recommended to me by Victor Arrighi ); to buy myself a sheepskin-lined Canadian jacket, as winter in Berlin can be very harsh and we'll be called upon to make inspection rounds in the camps; to go to the Hôtel Matignon, where President Laval hands me a copy of the decree formalizing my appointment and wishes me good luck in the accomplishment of my task (it's the first time I've seen him, but it won't be the last).

At last everything is ready. All I have to do is pack my bags and get my files together. Our departure is set for December 11, at 9am.

Oh dear! I'd forgotten the most important thing: to go to the Hotel *Continental*, so that I don't have to check in twice a month (my next check-in date is December 13). I rush there. It's nearly 7pm when I arrive at the Kommandantur. The office is about to close. I speak to a Feldwebel who is still on duty. I explain why I'm here. I have to stammer a little because he doesn't understand a word.

- It's an exceptional case," he says, "I don't know how to deal with it. Come back another day.

- Impossible! Today is the 10th. I'm taking the train tomorrow morning. I can't wait. In fact, it's very simple. If you don't mind, I'll dictate the text.

He nods. I dictate:

*"The Pans Kommandantur informs Mr. Jacques Benoist- Méchtn, born in Paris on 1.7.1901, that he is released from the control imposed on prisoners of war, due to his transportation to Berlin."*

I pause for a moment. Then I add:

*"Mr Benoist-Méchin remains a de jure prisoner of war."*

It's a coquetry, but it's important to me. I have the idea that this desire to identify with them will bring me good luck.

As he handed me the sheet, the Feldwebel said, with a bored expression:

- I'm sorry, but this certificate has to be signed by my boss, Major Reichenbach.

- Where is it?

- He's gone to town. I won't see him again until tomorrow.

This is it! I won't be able to catch the train! And Scapini waiting for me in Berlin...

- What time will he be here?

- When the office opens, at half past 7.

I think quickly. Everything can still be arranged.

- Listen carefully!" I said to the adjutant, "give this paper to your boss as soon as he arrives. Ask him to sign it immediately. I'll pick it up around 8 o'clock, on my way to the Gare du Nord. Make sure everything is ready, so I don't miss my train. And don't forget the last sentence!

- I promise!

I hope he keeps his word!

I go home to spend this last evening with my mother. We chat late into the night. At one o'clock in the morning, the telephone rings. It's Abetz. He tells me news so startling that I can't believe my ears.

But to fully understand its significance, we need to take a step back.

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CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF L'AIGLON

(December 1940)

On November 10, 1938, I was in Berlin to give a lecture on "*The French and German armies, face to face through history*". In it, I showed how these two armies had constantly modeled themselves on each other over the centuries. I quoted Napoleon's exclamation on the evening of the Battle of Bautzen, when he had seen the Prussian battalions maneuver: "Those buggers learned everything from me; but they learned it faster than I thought." To my great surprise, my talk had taken place in front of an audience of generals, which gave it a certain resonance in the German capital. There were General von Arnim, General Beck, General von Witzleben, General Halder, General Guderian and others. I concluded by saying that war was unquestionably a means of getting to know and value each other, but one so costly that Europe was no longer in a position to afford it, as non-European powers were growing up on its bangs, just waiting for an opportunity to strip it of its primacy. This sentence was greeted with applause.

I was staying with friends in the Gr newald district when, the next day, a telephone message told me that Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Reich Foreign Minister, wanted to have a few moments of conversation with me. Wondering what he might have to say to me, I made my way to Wilhelmstrasse, where I was immediately ushered into his office.

From the outset, the Minister informed me that he would be going to Paris shortly, to sign a treaty of non-aggression and good neighborliness with the French government.

- Mr. Georges Bonnet has just sent me the final text of the agreement. So everything is ready. But before I leave Berlin, I'd like to know how you think I'll be received in Paris. Very well, I suppose, since there are no longer any bones of contention between our two countries?

- I don't want to disappoint you, Mr. Minister, but you may not be as well received as you seem to think.

- Why?" asked Ribbentrop, clearly surprised.

- Because the atmosphere isn't exactly conducive to Franco-German rapprochement.

- Yet my coming to Paris is not without significance! It confirms our abandonment of any territorial claim to Alsace-Lorraine. This is no small thing! In fact, it's a historic event! The signing of the treaty puts a definitive end to the long series of conflicts that have bloodied our two countries since 1815...

- I accept the omen, Minister! But put yourself in my compatriots' shoes! For several years now, the Reich has been pursuing a policy for which they feel they are bearing the brunt. In March 1935, it reintroduced compulsory military service; in March 1936, it remilitarized the left bank of the Rhine; in March 1938, it Anschlussed Austria; in September of the same year, it signed the Munich Agreement and annexed the Sudetenland. That's a lot in such a short space of time! The result is a tension that you would be wrong to underestimate.

- We haven't taken anything away from France, as far as I know!" exclaimed Mr von Ribbentrop with visible irritation. Neither Mainz, nor Vienna, nor Carlsbad are on French territory! And just think, we've done all this without spilling a drop of blood...

- I know," I replied. But the French are wondering where you're going to stop. Anti-fascist feelings are very strong there, and the excesses of Kristallnacht made things even worse. They say to themselves: the Germans keep gaining advantages. They arm themselves, they expand, but they never offer the slightest compensation. The result is growing animosity.

- Is it our fault that the victors of 1918 imposed a draconian *Diktat* on us? That they pursued a policy of dismemberment? We



were down and out. Is it not normal that our recovery should be accompanied by a desire to erase every last vestige of that era? Is it my fault if I'm constantly in demand and have nothing to offer in return?

- But you have to take the public's reactions into account... You see, Mr. Minister, when you're often invited by a lady of the house and you can't return the courtesy, you can always send her a bouquet of flowers, make her a present...

- What gift would you like me to give France? I really can't think of anything...

- Yes, Excellency. There is something you can do. And if you do it in time, I'm sure your visit to Paris will have a very different atmosphere.

- What do you mean?

- Give us back the coffin of the Ro' de Rome... I mean the ashes of the Duke of Reichstadt, which lie in Vienna, in the Capuchin vault. You know how much Napoleon loved his son, how much he wanted to see him again before he died. He mentions him on almost every page of the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. You can't imagine how popular the figure of L'Aiglon has remained with us! He's a legendary figure. Please return his coffin to us, so that we can place it at Les Invalides, next to that of his father. This gesture will touch the hearts of the French people, and make your visit here even more special. .

But Mr von Ribbentrop didn't let me finish my sentence. With a gesture of denial, he replied:

- I'm sorry I can't go ahead with your proposal.

I don't see the point. It would be a purely sentimental gesture, without any political significance...

I did my best to convince him otherwise. But it was all in vain: Mr von Ribbentrop had nothing to give.

\*

On leaving the Foreign Minister's office, I crossed Wilhelmstrasse to Otto Abetz, with whom I had an appointment. At the time, he was in charge of Franco-German relations at the "Büro Ribbentrop", which served as the Party's diplomatic service.

- Are you satisfied with your meeting with our Foreign

Minister? he asked me point-blank.

- I'm afraid," I replied, "that our conversation has disappointed him. He asked me how he would be received in Paris. I warned him against excessive optimism. As for me, I made him a proposal that he didn't see fit to accept.

- Which one?

I repeated to Abetz what I had just told his boss. I had emphasized, with all possible warmth, the favorable repercussions that the restitution of Napoleon's son would inevitably have on French opinion. As for me, it was of little importance to ensure that M. von Ribbentrop's visit to Paris would have a greater impact. But I was anxious to seize any opportunity that might ease the tension between France and Germany.

Unlike Ribbentrop, Abetz immediately grasped the significance of the affair. As soon as I had formulated it, my proposal won him over. He asked me how I planned to carry it out.

- It's quite delicate," I tell him, "because in events of this kind, you have to be careful not to offend any sensitivities. I think the best thing to do would be to set up two private committees - created for the occasion - but acting in concert with their respective governments. I would like these committees to be made up primarily of the living descendants of the great figures of the Napoleonic era: in your case, Blücher, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Schwartzemberg, and others if they exist. At home, Murat, Berthier, Masséna, Junot, Suchet, Poniatowski and others. The German committee would escort the coffin to the Kehl bridge. There, halfway across the Rhine, it would be handed over to the French committee, which had come to greet it. Afterwards, the French committee would take charge of the coffin and invite the German committee to accompany it to Paris, where L'Aiglon's remains would be handed over to the French government for deposition under the dome of the Invalides.

- What a superb idea!" exclaimed Abetz. Would you like to take charge of setting up the French committee, while I set up the German one?

- What's the point, since Mr von Ribbentrop doesn't want to hear about it?

- Let's not throw the handle after the axe. Leave it to me. I'll

see if I can't overcome this difficulty. How much longer do you intend to stay in Berlin?

- About two or three days.

- Very well, then. It's imperative that we meet again before you leave. I'll phone you before then.

I waited four days. Since Abetz hadn't come forward, I considered the matter buried.

On the morning of the day I was about to leave for Paris, the telephone rang. It was Abetz. The Party delegate for Franco-German affairs was asking me to drop by his office. I began to hope again. But when I saw his worried face, I told myself that all hope was vain. He began by outlining the steps he had taken since my last visit.

- Reflecting after your departure on what you had told me," he said, "I felt that the matter was too important to be left to second-rate people. So I decided to submit it to the Führer himself. I went to the Chancellery, where I faithfully repeated your words to him. Hitler listened attentively and exclaimed: "What an excellent idea! It's exactly the right thing to do! I'm going to return the coffin of the King of Rome to the French, and intend to give this ceremony all the pomp and circumstance it deserves. But tell me: did Mr. Benoist-Méchin come up with this idea?" I replied in the affirmative. He then added with a disgruntled look: "How come Goebbels didn't think of it before him? That's his job! In any case, I'm going to give instructions for this project to be carried out as soon as possible." He then telephoned Seyss-Inquart\* in Vienna, in my presence, and instructed him to take the necessary steps immediately, as the Capuchin crypt in which the coffin has been placed does not belong to the State. It is the private property of the Habsburgs. The transfer must be carried out correctly.

- So why do you look so glum? The game's up!

- I thought so too. But it would have been too good to be true! The devil had to get involved. The execution of your project has come up against... how shall I put it?... a certain opposition...

- Some opposition? But where could it come from, since the Führer agrees?

Abetz was clearly reluctant to tell me more. Finally, he decided

to speak.

- After all," he told me, "it was your idea. So it's only natural that you should know the whole truth. After getting in touch with Seyss-Inquart, Hitler called Goebbels on the phone to wash his head. Sometimes the Führer's tantrums are feigned. This time, it was not. After telling him about the project, he reproached him for not having thought of it first, for wasting his time on amorous intrigues. Goebbels, naturally, was incensed. And yet, at the moment, he has a distinguished Italian guest in his home: General Pariani, head of the Fascist Militia. Whether clumsily or intentionally - and I think intentionally, because I know how Machiavellian he is! -Goebbels told Pariani everything: the Führer's decision to return the coffin of the King of Rome to France, and his desire to make the ceremony as glamorous as possible. On hearing these words, Pariani was startled: "That's insane! If it wasn't you telling me, I wouldn't believe it! How can we do that? Return the coffin of the Corsican's son to France,

Arthur Seyss-Inquart (1896-1946). An Austrian lawyer who rallied to Nazism, he was appointed Reichsstatthalter of Ostmark (Austria's new name) after the Anschluss in 1938. Appointed Reich Commissioner for the Netherlands in 1940, he distinguished himself by his brutality. Sentenced to death at the Nuremberg Trials, he was hanged on October 16, 1946.

when Corsica is a territory we claim for ourselves every day? And of a son to whom his father had given, what's more, the title of "King of Rome"... Not only will this arouse the French patriotism of the Corsicans, but it's a real challenge to the Italian government! I must inform the Palace of Venice immediately...

"Without missing a beat, Pariani got in touch with Ciano. He piqued his interest by presenting the affair as a plot against Italy. Ciano passed the news on to Mussolini, telling him: "This is what Hitler is up to behind our backs! If it hadn't been for Pariani's vigilance, I wouldn't have known. Really, Duce, if the Führer persists in his intentions, we'll have to reconsider our policy towards Germany.

I was stunned. What a stir my initiative had caused! Goebbels' irritation, Pariani's anger, Ciano's indignation... Poor Aiglon! Was his face eternally condemned to raise storms?

On receiving Ciano's communication," Abetz continued, "Mussolini telephoned the Führer in person. He told him that this was a poor reward for the role he had played during the Munich Conference and that, if he persisted in wanting to return the Duke

of Reichsradt's enclaves to France, he would be obliged to consider this act as an unfriendly gesture, even as a breach of the Pact of Steel...".

What a comedy! Such emotion had seemed ridiculous. But now I understood why Abetz had greeted me with such a worried brow.

- Now I suppose we'll have to give it up for good," I said.

- Not yet," replied Abetz.

My eyes widened.

- What do you mean, not yet?

- No, I haven't. Not yet," he repeated. I saw the Führer again this morning. Although he tried to put 1 incident into perspective, he was mortified. He attributed Mussolini's *veto* to petty jealousy. Hitler was determined to make this gesture. At first, he hadn't thought about it. Then, very quickly, his imagination took hold and he made it "his thing". Given his shady nature, he's even more keen to do it now that someone's trying to stop him. That's why he's asked me to tell you

that if the present moment doesn't lend itself to its realization, he'll hold on to it anyway and act on it as soon as circumstances allow.

- Am I to understand that this is a disguised refusal?

- The proof is that he has asked me to discreetly continue the preparatory work, and hopes that you will do the same.

Before leaving Abetz, I asked him to confirm this in writing. He agreed, and a few days later sent me the following letter:

The N.S.D.A.P. delegate for foreign policy matters to the  
Fiihrer's deputy General Staff  
Main department X

Berlin, 31/11/1938

*To Mr Benoist-Méchin,*

*With reference to our discussions on the possibility of transferring the ashes of "L'Aiglon", who are now in the Capuchin vault in Vienna, to the Dôme des Invalides in Paris, I would like to inform you that I have observed a favorable atmosphere for this project both in the competent departments in Vienna and in the Reich government itself.*

*These observations authorize me to assure you that any suggestion to transfer the ashes of Aiglon at a date that appears favorable to both the French and German sides will be acted upon, and that the transfer will be carried out, even where it takes place on German territory, in a manner that takes into account Napoleon's great military genius.*

*It's symbolic that the cradle of the "King of Rome" would remain in Vienna, his mother's homeland, while the coffin would be laid to rest in Paris, alongside his father, as a son belongs to his mother in his childhood, and to his father in his work and death.*

*As agreed, I'm continuing to handle this matter on my own, too, on a confidential basis, until such time as the circles you will interest in this project*

*and the Services in Berlin consider that the time  
for its execution has arrived.*

*With my best compliments  
Yours faithfully  
Otto Abetz*

On the very day Abetz had sent me these lines, the Havas agency had announced Ribbentrop's arrival in Paris. But Ciano was on his guard. He hadn't forgotten Pariani's "revelations" and feared that Ribbentrop might play a trick on him by making a statement on the subject in spite of everything. So he set about pulling the rug out from under him. On November 31, he gave a speech to the Italian Parliament in which he vehemently called for Corsica to be attached to Italy, adding that "all those who would try to oppose the realization of this demand would bitterly regret it". At the time, the meaning of this sentence escaped the public, but for me it was clear. It meant that if Ribbentrop made the slightest reference to the project, he would be considered *persona non grata* in Rome, which would put Hitler in an embarrassing situation.

On December 5, 1938, Ribbentrop arrived in the Rue de Lille. On the 6th, the Franco-German non-aggression treaty was signed in the Grand Salon de l'Horloge at the Quai d'Orsay. But the atmosphere was frosty. No mention was made of the King of Rome. The Reich Foreign Minister, whose original schedule had included a visit to Les Invalides, had abandoned it at the last minute, leaving Paris disappointed and vexed.

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Since then, two years had passed. Franco-German tension had continued to mount. The stunned world had witnessed, one after the other, the occupation of Prague, the conclusion of the German-Soviet pact, the entry of German divisions into Poland, and the declaration of war.

In May 1940, the events of the invasion, the debacle and the occupation of three-fifths of French territory took place.

This is a most significant episode. On June 23, 1940 - twenty-four hours after the armistice came into effect - Hitler made a

whirlwind visit to Paris, accompanied by architect Albert Speer \* and sculptor Arno Breker \*\*. The program included a visit to Les Invalides. I borrow the description from Arno Breker himself.

"After a detailed examination of Hardouin Mansart's masterpiece," he tells us in his memoirs<sup>1</sup>, "we entered the building. No one could escape the solemn atmosphere. Was it its architectural dimensions alone? Was it the unusual and unique lighting that enlarges the space in such a striking way? From the bluish light that spreads from top to bottom? No one could have said.

"We approached the white marble railing that surrounds Napoleon's tomb.

"Hitler held his cap in his hand, pressed against his chest. He bowed. A solemn, imposing silence surrounded us. *I wish my ashes to rest on the banks of the Seine, among the French people whom I loved so much.* Simple and moving, Napoleon's will was engraved in marble.

"Still mute, we lowered our gaze to the circular floor of the crypt. Attached to the pillars, clusters of glorious, faded standards bowed before the porphyry sarcophagus that guards Napoleon's remains for eternity.

"On the marble mosaic floor, we read the names of his most famous victories: Rivoli, the Pyramids, Marengo, Austerlitz, L  na, Friedland, Wagram, Moskova...

"Witnesses to this historic moment, we secretly hoped, we even waited, that Hitler would find words befitting the place and the moment."

Then something absolutely unexpected happened, at least for those who were present at the scene, as they were unaware of its background. Remembering the plan I had submitted to him through Abetz, which Mussolini's opposition had prevented, Hitler spoke of the Duke of Reichstadt, Napoleon's son. "Believing that the restitution of his remains would be a magnificent gesture, likely to seal the reconciliation with the French people," Breker continues, "he gave the order to have the ashes of the Duke of Reichstadt transferred to Paris, to be placed alongside those of his father."

\*

Needless to say, I didn't know about this scene until much later



(on June 23, I'd just been taken prisoner at Mazières-en-Gâtine, and was watching the bulk of the German X<sup>e</sup> army surge before my eyes).

So I was all the more surprised when, at 1 a.m. on December 11, 1940, the telephone rang and I heard Abetz say to me:

- I've learned that you'll be leaving for Berlin in a few hours. I don't want you to leave Paris without telling you that your dearest wish will come true.

- My dearest wish?

Within seconds, the craziest ideas were racing through my head. I think of freeing all the prisoners, signing a peace treaty...

- L'Aiglon's ashes return to Paris!

I've been through so much in the last few months that I've almost completely forgotten about this project. Announcing its realization seems a tall order.

- Are you joking?

- Not at all. I'm serious. The Führer has decided to transfer the coffin of the King of Rome to Les Invalides, to mark the hundredth anniversary of the return of Napoleon's remains<sup>er</sup>. Thus, one hundred years after his transfer from St. Helena, the body of the father and that of the son will finally be reunited.

- But isn't the anniversary just a few days away?

- Yes: December 15.

- In four days? And the coffin of the King of Rome will be in Paris on that date?

- Yes, we are. There are some wonderful ceremonies planned for the occasion, and it's a shame you won't be able to attend. For the moment, the arrangements are still being kept secret, but I didn't want you to hear them from anyone but me. Remember our efforts in 1938? I told you not to despair!

I immediately feel my heart clench.

- It can't be! Don't do it!" I said in a strangled voice. This is not the time! What was good in 1938 is not good today!

- I don't understand you!" retorts Abetz moodily. Didn't you come up with this idea? Didn't you tell us that the French would appreciate this gesture, that they would see it as a symbol of our desire for reconciliation? Don't you understand that it's infinitely more valuable today than it was two years ago?

- But no! Circumstances have changed. Paris is now occupied.

The German flag flies over all public buildings. Besides, how could such a ceremony take place in the absence of the Head of State?

- He'll be there! Marshal Pétain has been invited...

- In Paris? This is insane! You don't realize what you're doing! If he shows up - which I doubt - people back home will say he's your prisoner. And if he doesn't, Hitler will be entitled to consider his absence a personal affront. In any case, the ceremony will take place in an atmosphere of sadness and dejection. Les Invalides is placed under foreign trusteeship. The Marshal will be received by a detachment of the Wehrmacht...

- Rest assured, he will be received with all the honors due to his rank. And it will be, believe me, a moving spectacle to see today's victor lower his sword before yesterday's winner.

- No, you're not! You're incurably romantic! I'm telling you, it will have the exact opposite effect. I can feel that we're heading for new misfortunes!

- You French really are incomprehensible! You start by wanting something. Then you do the impossible to get it, and when you finally get it, you don't want it anymore! You're more complicated than the Chinese!

I can feel the ambassador starting to lose patience.

- Couldn't we at least postpone the ceremony until after the end of hostilities?

- It's out of the question!" cries Abetz. It would lose all meaning, by which I mean the meaning the Führer intends to give it. The ceremony will take place on the appointed day. The coffin van has already left Vienna. It will soon arrive in Compiègne. And you want us to put it on a siding and wait for better times?

It's hopeless!

- I assure you it would be better...

- That's impossible," says Abetz.

- So come what may," I said in a resigned voice, putting down the earpiece.

I go to my library and pick up the *Choses vues* volume, in which Victor Hugo describes the transfer of Napoleon 1<sup>er</sup>'s ashes to Les Invalides, as it took place on December 15, 1840. Even then, things had not gone well. It was Siberian cold: sixteen degrees below zero. The old marshals of the Empire and the dignitaries of Louis-Philippe chattered their teeth as the coffin

passed. Worse still, the atmosphere was one of sloppiness, improvisation and embarrassment. It is certain," wrote Hugo, "that the whole ceremony had a singular character of escamotage. The government seemed afraid of the ghost it was conjuring up. It seemed as if Napoleon was being shown and hidden at the same time. Everything that was too great or too touching was left in the shadows. The real and the grandiose were concealed in more or less splendid wrappings, the imperial procession was concealed in the military procession, the army was concealed in the national guard, the Chambers were concealed in the Invalides, the coffin was concealed in the cenotaph. In short, everything had been missed. And yet, the 1840 ceremony had not taken place under the watchful eye of an occupier! But this time...

A few hours later, I left Paris with dark forebodings. When I arrive in Berlin, I learn of Laval's disgrace, his arrest, the Marshal's refusal to come to Paris, and the oppressive atmosphere in which the ceremony took place: the heavy bronze sarcophagus advancing in the middle of the night under gusts of snow, flanked by two rows of Republican Guards and Wehrmacht soldiers brandishing torches, in the sole presence of Abetz, General von Stulpnagel \*, Admiral Darlan and General de La Laurencie ?

For my part, I was deeply disappointed. I'd wanted the ceremony to take place in broad daylight, but it had taken place under the glow of torches, giving it the air of a nocturnal conjuration. I would have liked it to take place in front of an enthusiastic audience, but very few people attended, and the announcement of the return of the ashes was met with indifference or sarcasm. I would have liked the French authorities to welcome the German delegation as guests outside the gates of the Invalides, but instead the German military commander received the French officials as guests in their own capital. I would have liked the return of the King of Rome to usher in a long period of peace between our two countries, but never had the future been more fraught with threats, never had the disarray of spirits been greater. General de La Laurencie was so embarrassed that he kept pulling on his white gloves to put on a brave face. Admiral Darlan, usually so impassive, hid his nervousness behind a commanding smile. Abetz, sombre and withdrawn, had taken on a haughty, impenetrable expression. Everyone wondered what the next day would bring, and feared

that Hitler would take terrible reprisals.

None of this could have surprised me, because I had foreseen it. Who better than I to know the feelings that had inspired Hitler and, consequently, the violence of his reaction? He, the vanquisher, had been scorned at the very moment he had intended to make a generous gesture to the vanquished - a gesture he had been assured would touch the hearts of the French.

But the reasons why the French couldn't understand him were all too obvious: insufficient supplies, absent prisoners, occupied territory, the country cut in two, the humiliation of defeat. "*They take the coal from us and give us back the ashes*", we read, written in chalk,

■ General Otto von Stulpnagel (1878-1948). Commander-in-chief of the occupation forces in France. Responsible in particular for the execution of 22 hostages in August 1941. He committed suicide in the Cherche-Midi prison, before he could be tried by the French justice system.

1. At the time, General de La Laurencie was the government's Delegate General in the occupied territories.

on the walls of certain suburban factories. Others saw Hitler's initiative as a maneuver designed to make French opinion more docile to his will, without seeing that in the balance of power at the time, he only had to frown to get what he wanted.

It was all very sinister. I sensed that these events would have serious repercussions. But I didn't expect to have to face them so soon.

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# CHAPTER III

## LA FERTÉ-HAUTERIVE NEWSPAPER

(December 11, 1940 - January 19, 1941)

*December 11, 1940* - Departure for Berlin, accompanied by my chief of staff, Jean Lombard. Georges Scapini, appointed General Commissioner for Prisoners of War, in agreement with the Maréchal and President Laval, asked me to lead the diplomatic delegation of French prisoners of war to Berlin.

Yesterday, the President received me at Hôtel Matignon and explained at length the significance of his policy.

- When you see our prisoners, talk to them," he says. Make them understand that it is in their interests, in the interests of their families and their country, that I am acting as I am. Here's a brochure by Jean Montigny , in which the deputy for Sarthe explains the events of last June and July in Bordeaux and Vichy. I think you'll find everything you need to convince them.

Our mission will therefore have a triple role to fulfill: medical, moral and political. From a medical point of view, our task will be relatively easy, as the German health services are active and competent. Morally, on the other hand, the mission will have its work cut out for it: creating and maintaining links between our captive compatriots and their absent homeland, and liaising between them and their families. But it is above all on the political level that our intervention can be most useful, since it involves negotiating with the German military authorities - who are holding our eighteen hundred thousand prisoners - the return to their homes of certain categories of them: fathers of four children, veterans of 1914-1918, officers of our navy and our African army, civil servants, farmers, miners, railway workers, family breadwinners, etc. Of course, we would like to bring them back to their country of origin. Of course, we'd like to bring them all home. But will that be possible? The armistice agreement stipulates that they will only be released after the end of hostilities. How long will it be before then?

Scapini, who is totally dedicated to his task, is quite optimistic, given the results he has already achieved. But he points out that negotiations with the leaders of I'O.K.H. - General Reinecke in particular - while marked by great courtesy, are being

conducted with rigid formalism, and that members of the German high command seem rather reticent about early releases. They hold a pledge which they clearly have no desire to relinquish. This is to be expected. But this pledge represents the majority of French youth. It's up to us to do everything we can to ensure that they are repatriated in stages, but quickly.

*12 December* - Arrival in Berlin. I meet up with Scapini. Five or six members of the mission - including an active and friendly young military doctor - are already on site. The first task is to organize our work. The O.K.H., Scapini tells us, "would like us to carry out a tour of inspection in the stalags and oflags, to check on the sanitary conditions of the camps, the distribution of parcels, the calorie content of the food, etc. We will be able, on this occasion, to make a report on the situation in the camps. On this occasion, we will be able to pass on messages from prisoners to their families, since we will be authorized to speak to them face-to-face, without the presence of German witnesses.

*13 December* - Nothing to report.

*14 December* - Ambassador Scapini informs me that he has just received a telephone call from Wilhelmstrasse. Mr. von Weizsäcker, Secretary General of the Foreign Office, asks to see us urgently. Scapini and I go there immediately, and are received by Mr. von Weizsäcker at 10:30.

The Wilhelmstrasse general secretary looks worried.

- What do you think the fall and arrest of President Laval means?" he asked Ambassador Scapini point-blank.

Scapini is startled.

- What's this? Laval is no longer in government?

- Better than that: he was arrested on the Maréchal's orders. He is currently being held in custody at his Châteldon estate.

- It's impossible... you must have misunderstood," replies Scapini, whose hands tighten on the arms of his armchair.

- Our information is definite," assures Mr von Weizsäcker. We have withheld the news until now, waiting for a denial. Since no denial has been forthcoming, it will appear in the midday papers shortly. We can't keep it under wraps any longer. English and American radio stations are talking of nothing else. The French

speakers at the BBC are celebrating Laval's departure as a personal victory.

- I didn't know... I didn't know anything," said Scapini in a strangled voice.

- And now, what's going to happen?" asks the General Secretary. Will the Vichy government also denounce the armistice? That would be madness on their part...

That's right! What's going to happen? We'd like to know ourselves...

- In any case," says Mr von Weizsäcker as he takes his leave, "I'm afraid this act will have very serious consequences for France.

He nods thoughtfully. As for Ambassador Scapini, he's distraught. We return quickly to the Hotel Adlon.

- It doesn't make sense! What could they have been doing in Vichy? Have they all lost their minds?" exclaims Scapini, who is walking up and down his room, bumping into the furniture in a way he never normally does. "I've got to get back to Paris tonight. I absolutely must know what's going on there. Here, we're cut off from everything..."

In the evening, I accompany Scapini to the station. He'll be traveling alone, with his faithful Ahmed. He's very nervous. Truth be told, his emotion seems excessive. As far as I'm concerned, the situation doesn't seem so dramatic. I was a prisoner of war when the armistice was signed. I didn't follow the subsequent events in Bordeaux and Vichy, and can't measure the transformations our institutions have undergone in the meantime. I've already seen so many ministries collapse in France that it hardly moves me. Is Laval gone? Another will succeed him. What's so new and dreadful about that?

*December 15-18* - Work on organizing the mission's services. Finalization of inspection visits to camps. The first will take place in Saxony and Thuringia, around December 25. No news from Mr. Scapini.

The German press briefly announced Laval's downfall. Little or no comment. The Germans hardly know the President and have little opinion of him. In their eyes, he's the man behind Montoire and Franco-German reconciliation. That's about it. On the other hand, we have received a packet of newspapers from Paris.



They're throwing fire and flame. Déat, in *V Œuvre*, is very violent. Although I don't take all the catastrophes he predicts literally, I now have a better grasp of the seriousness of the event. It's quite different from what I thought at first. Scapini, the blind man, had seen more clearly than me.

*December 19* - I go to I'O.K.H. to settle certain details concerning the delegation's first visit to the prison camps. General Reinecke apologizes for not being able to see me. I ask to speak to the colonel who is his deputy. He's at a conference and can't see me either. I return, rather alarmed, to the delegation headquarters. The silence of the German military tells me nothing.

*December 20* - Still nothing from I'O.K.H. Wilhelmstrasse hides behind polite phrases. I ask for telephone contact with Hôtel Matignon in Paris. I'm told it's impossible, and that until further notice, the delegation is no longer authorized to communicate with France by direct wire.

*December 25* - An unofficial message from the German liaison officer between the delegation and I'O.K.H., informs me that the diplomatic POW mission is no longer authorized to visit the camps and that there can be no further question of the release of the categories of prisoners planned prior to the latest events. I try to contact Scapini by telephone. I can't get through. After several hours' waiting, I am told that the line to Paris is "out of order" and that I cannot be told when it will be restored. I try to reach Mr von Weizsäcker. He is absent. The order seems to be to cut off all contact with us. There is no French embassy or consulate in Berlin. We are the only accredited French mission in Germany. I watch the capital of the Reich sink into the night, as a feeling of unease washes over me.

*January 3, 1941* - Could the New Year be off to a better start? I am finally summoned by General Reinecke. I go to F. O. K. H., happy to escape the painful ostracism in which we have been held for the past fortnight. Alas, my optimism was short-lived. General Reinecke officially notifies me that all visits to the camps have been postponed *sine die*, that all planned releases have been cancelled and that the German military administration will no

longer accept coLs sent to prisoners through Secours national. As for parcels sent directly by families, their weight and number will be considerably reduced. From now on, only visits by delegates from the International Red Cross in Geneva will take place.

- The Reich," declares General Remecke, "will henceforth abide by the stipulations of the Armistice Agreement and the Hague Agreements.

Amsi all the benefits that had been granted in principle during the month of November have been cancelled. I return from l'O.K.H. full of bitterness and anger. Really, it's all too stupid... Too unfair too. How are our prisoners responsible for what happened in Vichy?

*January 5* - Our presence in Berlin seems quite superfluous. Apart from a few contacts with the Swiss legation, so that it can inform the Geneva Red Cross of the new provisions of the German general staff, we have nothing to do and are languishing in inaction. We had arrived here full of enthusiasm and hope. Are we going to fail, before we've even had a chance to begin our task? I'll have to go to Paris to see Ambassador Scapini, report to him on the situation (of which he may be unaware) and ask him for new directives. An iron curtain has fallen between us and the prisoners. It's a terrible feeling to know they're there, hundreds of thousands of them, so close, and to be totally cut off from them.

*January 7* - I've made up my mind to return to Paris this evening. My chief of staff, Jean Lombard, will act as interim manager during my absence. This intolerable situation has gone on far too long. Our forced inaction was taking on a humiliating character.

*January 8* - Arrival in Paris. My first visit is, naturally, to Ambassador Scapini. I arrive at his home, rue Cortambert, at 10 o'clock. I find him in a state of great agitation. It increased still further when I informed him of the situation in Berlin. Dear Scapini, so ardent and sensitive! He fears that all his efforts to improve the lot of our prisoners will be in vain.

- We'll be talking about that cursed December 13th for a long time to come! I don't understand what went through the minds of certain people in Vichy! Even those who are hostile to the policy

of collaboration, because they think that Germany will lose the war - which is by no means certain - should realize that it's far too early to break with her! She has France at her mercy, and can exert formidable pressure on her. Do you think it amuses me to constantly beg for benefits for our prisoners from those who took my sight? Of course not. But since I can no longer fight - I did enough of that in 1914-1918 - I can only put my blindness to good use. When I ask the O.K.H. for something, they can hardly refuse it to a war-blind man. That's why I asked the Marshal to entrust me with this mission. But how can I be expected to succeed, if French politics is in such turmoil! And the Third Republic was accused of lacking continuity? You must go and see the Marshal, and describe to him in detail what you have just seen in Berlin.

Without waiting for my reply, Scapini picked up the phone and asked for the Marshal's office in Vichy. Through M. du Moulin de Labarthète\*, director of the civil cabinet, he obtains an appointment for me. The Maréchal will see me the day after tomorrow, Friday 10th, in the morning. Now I have to get the necessary papers. It's not that easy. As I'm still a "prisoner of war on captivity leave", I'm not allowed to cross the demarcation line.

If the German military authorities wanted to, they could prevent me from going to Vichy. Of course, I could cross the line illegally. But then there would be no way back. Farewell to all the work undertaken in Berlin, which is so dear to my heart!

11:30 - I visit Fernand de Brinon, the French government's delegate general in the occupied territories. He has replaced General de La Laurencie, who was relieved of this post the day after December 15. I tell him about my visit to the Marshal and ask him to obtain *the VAusweis* I need to get to Vichy.

- May you convince the Marshal of the need to take Mr. Laval back as soon as possible! says M. de Brinon. You can't imagine the difficulties we've been facing since December 13! We no longer have a government, and our administrations no longer know from whom they should take their instructions. I've just taken a note from Vichy to the German embassy, stating that within forty-eight hours, if Germany does not respond, the Marshal will publish the list of the new government, of which Laval will not be a member. Abetz considered that this decision

would definitively break the bridges between France and the Reich. The consequences could be disastrous! Naturally, the Germans won't respond to this note! Why should they? What interest do they have in seeing Laval return, who is desperate to negotiate with them in order to tie their hands and gain advantages for us? German military circles - some of whom feel that the armistice conditions were far too lenient - prefer to remain free, i.e. free to treat us as they please... Laval had already achieved appreciable results. He was on the verge of achieving more. All that was destroyed in a matter of minutes.

In order to bring me up to date on everything that has happened on the Franco-German front since December 13, Mr. de Brinon has sent me the notes exchanged since then between the General Delegation and the German Embassy. They show that tension between Vichy and Berlin has continued to grow. Will this morning's latest note seal the rupture? Perhaps some French people want it to? How unfortunate! If they knew what was really going on, they'd think quite differently. The file is complete, with the exception of the Marshal's message, transmitted verbally to the Reich Chancellor by Admiral Darlan, during the meeting the two men had in Beauvais on December 23. I'm sure I'll be able to find out its content in Vichy, from Admiral Darlan himself.

Leaving M. de Brinon's, I go to the German embassy on rue de Lille, arriving at half past noon. The purpose of this trip was to get my papers in order and obtain a special authorization to cross the demarcation line. Applications must be made two weeks in advance. I have to leave tonight if I am to be able to see the Marshal tomorrow morning.

I am received by Ambassador Abetz, to whom I explain the reason for my visit. Despite his apparent detachment, he has the expression of a man who has just suffered a cruel defeat.

- The French are mistaken," he tells me, "if they think we've lost the game. Because we've been very decent up to now, they have no idea what a tougher occupation regime would mean. They are even more mistaken if they believe that Chancellor Hitler or M. von Ribbentrop demand - or simply wish - the return of President Laval. There are "hardliners" in the Führer's entourage who keep telling him that Germany can get whatever it wants from France by force and retaliation. Laval rather annoys them (in other words, as M. de Brinon has just told me). At Beauvais, Admiral Darlan

submitted to Hitler a list of ministers that did not include Laval's name.

He asked the Chancellor if he thought Laval's presence in the government was indispensable. Hitler flew into a rage: "What do you want me to do?" he replied to the admiral. I don't care who Laval is. If the Marshal doesn't want it, that's his business. But if the defeated French, disarmed and three-fifths occupied by my troops, believe they can defy me with impunity and choose to engage in a policy of hostility towards the Reich, rest assured that I will draw the necessary conclusions. It will not be difficult to bring them to their senses. I spared France last June. I gave her a chance. I won't do it twice. You've been warned! I'm not going to stop them from committing suicide for the sake of England.

For my part," continued Ambassador Abetz, "I ardently desire the return of President Laval, and I make no secret of the fact. Above all, don't imagine that I'm doing this because I'm obeying my government's directives. Quite the contrary. In doing so, I run the risk of making my bosses take a dim view of me. The Wilhelmstrasse, once its initial astonishment has passed, remains impenetrably silent about France. And that's exactly what worries me! If I wish with all my heart for Laval's return, it's because I love France and I don't want to see her crushed. The eciasement of the defeated never leads to anything except new revenges. Look where the rigors of the Treaty of Versailles have led us! I would like to avoid an even harsher Diktat for France, because I firmly believe that the interests of our two countries are complementary. I would like to achieve a peace of reason, freely negotiated, which ensures a peaceful existence for future generations. And only Laval can achieve such a peace. He is the greatest French statesman of our time. Why don't your compatriots realize this?

The ambassador develops at length this theme of a negotiated peace that will restore France to its rightful place in Europe. He ends by assuring me that he will do what is necessary for my *Ausweiss*, and that he hopes to be able to deliver it to M. de Brinon in the course of the afternoon.

At 3:30 p.m., I return to Scapxni's to bring him up to date on my conversations with M. de Brinon and Ambassador Abetz. He is very pessimistic and wishes me good luck.

- This is our last card," he says. If our affairs don't settle down very quickly, God knows where we'll end up...

At 4.45pm, I go to see Mr de Brinon, who gives me my pass. He's even more pessimistic than this morning.

- Look at this!" he says, unfolding a large basket leaf. What do you think?

I examine the cupboard spread out on his desk. Obviously, it's pretty grim. It says that from January 15, all French citizens aged between eighteen and forty-five, living in the occupied zone, must report to the German Kommandanturs to be registered.

- That's what's going to be posted shortly on the walls of every town and village in the occupied zone," he tells me in a dull voice.

- What does this mean?

- I don't know. Is it just a formality? Is this the beginning of a general internment measure? Will our entire male population be forced to leave for German labor camps? I've just received this document from the Hotel *Majestic*. Since 8 o'clock this morning, checkpoints along the demarcation line have been reinforced, no doubt to prevent escape. In the current situation, we can fear the worst...

Everywhere I go, I find people dismayed, distressed and in disarray. Everyone urges me to act and seems to expect a miracle from my intervention. Yet what am I? Not much. And I can't help thinking that everything must be going wrong for people to turn to me.

6 p.m.-I visit President Laval in his office on the Champs-Élysées. After all, he's the one we're talking about, and it's essential that I see him before discussing him with the head of state. He looks very calm, but his complexion is cloudy and his face is that of a man suffering from insomnia.

He describes his efforts to negotiate with the Germans, their prejudice towards him, and the obstacles of all kinds he had to overcome, both from the Wehrmacht leadership and from certain Vichy circles, in whom he always sensed a deafening hostility. He tells me about the events of December 13th, and at times I see a glint in his eye that worries me, as it proves that he has not yet overcome his resentment. What a passionate temperament! I ask him about his possible return to government.

- Me, back in government? You wouldn't want me to forget overnight the insults and abuse I've suffered, would you? I've been dragged through the mud, and France has suffered incalculable

harm in the process. Let those who broke the dishes fix them! Personally, I'll never go back to Vichy. It's a real cut-throat.

That doesn't make things any better. The Marshal, I'm told, no longer wants Laval. The Germans, for their part, are not keen on Laval. Laval doesn't want to return to government! And, as a backdrop to this lamentable imbroglio, fifteen hundred thousand prisoners, separated from their families, who may be joined by several million men from the occupied zone! Like it or not, our prisoners are hostages. If things escalate, Germany is in a position to bring its fist down on them until the final crushing. I'm not saying *it wants to*. I'm saying it *can*. So much for the immediate future.

As for the future, no one can say, but it looks bleak. The demarcation line is hermetically sealed. The two halves of France no longer communicate with each other. With its fields lying fallow and its factories paralyzed, the country is threatened with rapid asphyxiation.

At 9.15pm, having finally received all the necessary papers, I board the train to Vichy. It's packed to the rafters, as transport is scarce. But of all the French people in my carriage, you could count on the fingers of one hand those who have the right to go beyond Moulins.

*January 10* - Arrival in Vichy. I inform M. du Moulin that I am at the Marshal's disposal and go to *Y Hôtel du Helder*, headquarters of F Admiralty, where I have a long talk with Admiral Darlan. Although he didn't know me, the Admiral immediately showed a surprising degree of confidence in me. He explained that, strictly speaking, there was no longer a French government. It has been replaced by a three-member board, of which he is president, and which includes, in addition to himself, Pierre-Étienne Flandin and General Charles Huntziger.

Returning to the events of December 13, the Admiral stresses that he had nothing to do with them.

- I had no idea what was going on," he assures me, "no one consulted me. That evening, I went quietly to the movies and didn't learn of Laval's arrest until the next morning.

Apart from myself, I'm astonished that in a town as small as Vichy, where the slightest rumor spreads like wildfire, Admiral

Darlan knew nothing of the plot that was afoot. But I take note of his statement. Even if it's not entirely true, it at least expresses the position he *wants to* take with regard to events: that of absolute neutrality. He insists that he feels no hostility towards Laval and will do nothing to prevent a "reconciliation" between him and the Marshal.

He then looks back at his meeting with the Reich Chancellor in Beauvais on December 25. The meeting, which lasted an hour, took place in the Führer's lounge car.

- Interview is not the word," Darlan remarks, "because the conversation consisted mainly of a long monologue by Hitler, during which I was copiously yelled at (I reproduce his exact words). I've never been so badly treated in my life. When I asked the Führer if he really wanted Laval to head the French government, he literally exploded: "What do you care whether Laval is there or not? The only thing that interests me is what policy France intends to follow. If she wants to take a hostile attitude towards the Reich - and I'm convinced that's what's behind Laval's dismissal - let her! That's up to her. But let her expect no more benevolence from me. For a moment, I thought our two countries could get along. After meeting Laval at Montoire, I thought that this was an opportunity that should not be missed. That's why I turned down certain requests.

of Franco. I see I was wrong. Tell Vichy that in any case, it's not Germany, it's France that will foot the bill<sup>1</sup>."

- So what were Franco's requests?

- I don't know," replies the Admiral. The Führer was so angry that I couldn't get a word in edgewise. As for asking him any questions, I was careful not to! I was in a hurry to get out of the lounge car without asking for anything else.

- And now, what are you going to do?

- I don't know. The decision is in the hands of the Marshal. In my opinion, Laval's departure was largely due not to his anti-German stance, but to palace intrigue. The whole question boils down to this: it's not a question of whether or not France should pursue a policy of collaboration. As things stand, there is no other solution. The question is whether the Germans consider that this policy should be carried out by M. Laval and exclusively by him, or whether it can be carried out by someone else. What exactly do they value? A policy or a man? That's what needs to be clarified.



According to the German embassy in Paris, there's no salvation outside Laval. But is this opinion shared by the Reich's leaders? As someone from Berlin, what is your opinion?

- As far as I'm concerned," I said to the Admiral, "I don't think the Reich leaders are particularly keen on Laval, who made a pact with Stalin in 1935 , or at least they weren't *until* December 13th. Now, things are a little different. Since it was claimed in some newspapers that he had been dismissed because he was "the Germans' man", this has obviously increased their sympathy for him. They value him much more today than they did a month ago. As for the policy of "collaboration", I know that it seems to many Germans - especially the military - like a mortgage we have unduly contracted on their victory. They are already virtually convinced that they have everything they want from France. It therefore seems superfluous to them to negotiate for it.

- Certainly, at the armistice commission in Wiesbaden, we can argue, we can protest, but we're always forced to give in in the end. That's why broad negotiations can only take place in Paris. On this point, Laval was right. But he also made some major blunders.

- Which ones?

- I think they're mostly psychological. But others will tell you. Le Maréchal, for example.

I sense that the Admiral doesn't want to go down this slippery slope. His cordiality does not exclude caution.

At this point, the conversation is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Mr. Henri du Moulin de Labarthète informs me that the Marshal has asked me to lunch and will grant me an audience in the early afternoon. As for M. Flandin, he will receive me at 7pm.

*1:15pm:* Lunch at *the Hôtel du Parc* with the Maréchal. Attending: the Maréchale, Admiral Fernet \*, M. du Moulin de Labarthète, Dr. Bernard Ménétrele \*\* and Mme Ménétrele, General Auguste Laure \*\*\* and some members of the civil and military cabinets. After lunch, the Maréchal asks me to join him in his office.

- You don't know how glad I am to see you," he says, "because you've just come from Berlin and you're going to be able to tell me what's really going on there. Here, we're in a fog. We only know what's going on in the Rue de Lille. Mr. Abetz has violently sided

with Mr. Laval and is allowing the press in the occupied zone to shower me with insults. I find this very unpleasant, even though it actually helps me in a whole sector of opinion. But it's not Abetz who runs German politics. He has chiefs, whom I am assured do not share his opinions. I am told, for example, that the military are hostile to him and that many of them applauded Laval's departure. I'd like to have a clearer picture before making a decision. Moreover, the presence or absence of Mr. Laval in the government is an exclusively French matter. The armistice leaves me free to choose my collaborators. Had it been otherwise, I would not have signed it. So what does this interference by the embassy mean? Perhaps I was wrong to part company with Mr. Laval in the way I did. But it had become impossible. And to take him back now is even more impossible, because he was extremely rude to me. I would seem to be bowing to a German Diktat. My prestige would be greatly diminished. I would no longer have the authority to govern France. As for the Empire, let's not talk about it, our governors and residents wouldn't understand a thing.

The Marshal having finished speaking, I begin by explaining to him what I was able to see for myself in Berlin, and the disastrous effects of December 13 on the fate of our prisoners. I describe the iron curtain that has suddenly come down between them and us, and the halt to all previous releases. The Marshall listens to me with rapt attention. I then tell him about the poster shown to me by M. de Brinon, concerning the census of all French people between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. The Marechal is visibly moved by what I'm telling him, especially as I'm not pleading Laval's cause but that of our captives, with the eloquence perhaps conferred on me by having experienced the long days of waiting behind barbed wire myself.

- We've hit a dead end, Monsieur le Maréchal," I said in conclusion. If M. Laval misinformed you, others didn't inform you much better. I understand what you call "the drama of Laval's *presence* at the head of the French government". But what does it weigh, compared to the drama of *his absence*?

- You'll have to repeat all that to the members of the Steering Committee," says the Marshall thoughtfully. I'll ask them to meet in half an hour.

3:30 pm - Steering Committee meeting in the Salle du Petit Conseil, adjoining the Marshal's office. Seated around a green

table are Admiral Darlan, M.P.E. Flandin and General Huntziger. At the Marshal's request, I repeat the presentation I've just made. The Management Board agrees that the situation is deteriorating and that a way out of the impasse must be found. General Huntziger and Mr. Flandin ask for time to consider the matter, and agree to meet again tomorrow at 4 p.m. to take a decision.

8 p.m.: - Dinner with the Maréchal, in the presence of Governor General Boisson - who arrives from Dakar. After dinner, I learn that Yves Bouthillier, Minister of Finance, would like to speak to me. I go to see him at around 10pm.

Mr. Bouthillier is visibly alarmed at the idea of Laval's possible return. He is not unaware of his qualities as a negotiator, and pays tribute to his flexibility and ingenuity. But, in his eyes, the tragedy of *V Laval's absence* is far less than that which resulted from his *presence*.

M. Bouthillier believes that France can never recover if it keeps the institutions that led to its downfall. The armistice is what it is: it must be faithfully executed. But the whole of French politics must be centered on this preoccupation: rebuilding our institutions and reforming our morals. This work, announced by the Marshal in a series of messages, has a name: the National Revolution. But with Laval, national revolution was impossible. The former senator from the Seine is an old republican, a democrat and a liberal, who has had too much to do with the III<sup>e</sup> Republic not to have retained a nostalgia for the past. Several times President of the Council before the war, he retained from his socialist background a vulgarity that shocked the Maréchal. By training and temperament, he was hostile to the authoritarian regime the Maréchal wanted to establish. What's more, Laval was an empiric who worked without a plan, shrouding his actions in a halo of mystery that ultimately made them suspect to the head of state. He never reported on his negotiations in Paris, and deliberately kept all other cabinet members out of the loop. He and the Marechal were not made for each other, for one could not imagine two more different temperaments. What separates them is not a passing antagonism, but a fundamental and permanent incompatibility of mood. Laval considers the Marechal to be the President of the Republic, and treats him like a vase. The Marechal would like to reduce Laval to the role of chief of staff, who stands at attention before his hierarchical superior and reports to him on all his

actions, which infuriates Laval. What was the point of trying to reconcile two such dissimilar men? The patch-up won't last. Sooner or later, we'll end up with another December 13, perhaps worse than the first...

Bouthillier speaks with the accent of a perfect honest man, devoid of any personal ambition, who deplors the situation, but judges its psychological and moral causes with lucidity. He's the only one so far to have shaken me from my convictions. I left the meeting in a state of great perplexity and returned to *YHôtel du Parc*, convinced that it would be very difficult to find a solution to the problem. The most serious thing is that everyone is sincerely thinking of the country's interests. But these interests, on which everyone should agree, take on a contradictory aspect, depending on one's mind. Isn't this precisely the evil from which we are perishing?

*January 11, 9:30 a.m.* - I go to see Mr. Flandin, who would like to ask me about a few points of detail, before the Steering Committee meeting scheduled for 4 p.m.. He seems very embarrassed. He asks me if it's true that the Marshal's intention to publish in the *Journal Officiel* the list of a new government that would not include Laval's name is likely to make it more difficult to resume negotiations with the Germans.

I reply that in my opinion the publication of this list would be highly inappropriate. It risks nullifying our last chances of negotiating. No doubt the Germans have no right to *veto* the ministers chosen by the Marshal. But they can refuse to have the slightest contact with them. Given the urgency and number of issues to be debated, such a refusal would have unfortunate consequences. If the Marshal were then forced to reshuffle his cabinet, the humiliation would be far worse, and his prestige would be seriously damaged. Why rush things? The constitution of a new cabinet can wait a few days...

*10:30* - Meeting with General Huntziger at the Hotel *Majestic*. He informs me that the Marshal won't be able to keep me for lunch as he had intended, as he has to receive the diplomatic corps. He suggests that we lunch together at the Château de Charmeil, near Vichy, in the company of Colonel Lacaille, his chief of staff, Captain de Feligonde, his executive officer, and our military attaché in Budapest, which I gladly accept.

Over dinner, General Huntziger begins by reminiscing about the signing of the armistice and General de Gaulle's visit to his headquarters in Arcis-sur-Aube on June 11, 1940. Then he tells me about the very bad news he received that very morning from the Wiesbaden commission. Since Laval's departure, the Germans have been presenting us with an avalanche of demands, the volume of which is increasing day by day and which ultimately represent a crushing burden for the country. These demands include exorbitant quantities of coal, wheat, beet, meat and butter, as well as rolling stock of all kinds: locomotives, wagons, trucks, etc. And now the Germans have come to the rescue. And now the Germans have come up with a new demand. They want us to supply them with all our bauxite production '.

General Huntziger, visibly alarmed, declares that a way must be found, whatever the cost, to stem this flood of requests which, for France, amounts to a veritable haemorrhage. But how? A broad political negotiation would have to be initiated, in which we would be granted compensation in exchange for our services. In Wiesbaden, Huntziger admits that this is practically impossible. What about Paris? But isn't that exactly what Laval was looking for? It's a pity that his departure cut short conversations that we could have hoped would turn to our advantage...

*5pm* - Back at the *Hôtel du Parc*. In the corridors, I meet General Brécard, Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honor. He too believes that December 13 was a serious mistake.

- What a mess we've got ourselves into! he says to me. The British are exultant on the radio, the better to muddy the waters. But they're not loosening the rigor of their blockade, and are still trying to catch us by the throat. They have again refused *navicerts* to convoys carrying loads of peanut oil from Dakar to Marseille. They had, however, obtained a formal guarantee that the oil would not be delivered to the Germans. Governor General Boisson has just confirmed this to me.

*4 p.m.* - The board of directors meets in the small council room under the chairmanship of the Marechal. What will come out of these deliberations? The Marshal would have liked me to attend. I declined the honor, not wishing in any way to influence the debates.

*5:30 p.m.* - Admiral Darlan has been asked by his colleagues to pass on to me the decisions of the Executive Board. My

conversation with him lasts about two hours. He stressed the difficulties that would arise if Laval were to return too hastily, as he might appear to have been imposed on him by the Germans. It would therefore be better to proceed in stages. In conclusion, the Admiral handed me the following note, which he asked me to take to Paris immediately.

*RESOLUTIONS OF THE FRENCH STATE STEERING COMMITTEE TAKEN IN PLENARY SESSION ON JANUARY 11, 1941.*

*1°) No French government list will be published immediately, despite the inconvenience this causes the Marshal in governing.*

*2°) The policy of collaboration is not in question. The desire of the French government is to pursue it as before. However, the Marshal would like to know whether the return of M. Laval is a sine qua non condition for the continuation of this policy.*

*3°) If this is indeed the opinion of the Reich Chancellor, the Marshal is ready to consider the terms of Mr. Laval's return.*

*4°) The dispute between Marshal Pétain and President Laval is exclusively internal. The foundations of the new French state should be firmly established before Mr. Laval returns.*

*5°) Once the reform of our institutions was complete, M. Laval would be reinstated in the government. But, to avoid any misunderstanding, it is specified that his situation could not be equivalent to that which he occupied previously, in the following sense:*

*a) That he cannot again become the presumptive successor to the Head of State;*

*b) That the Marshal also refused to entrust him with the Ministry of the Interior.*

*6°) Admiral Darlan, Chairman of the Steering Committee, would be willing to meet with Mr. von Ribbentrop, in order to clear up any misunderstandings that might still exist between the two governments.*

Attached to this note is another entitled: Modalités du retour éventuel de M. Laval. Here it is:

*1°) M. Laval will send Marshal Pétain a personal letter expressing his regrets and making amends for the tone he used towards the Head of State during their last meeting on December 17. Should this letter be deemed satisfactory by the Marshal, an interview could be held between the Marshal and Mr. Laval to publicly mark their reconciliation.*

*2°) The Marshal would like to obtain from the German authorities the freedom to go from time to time to Versailles and to certain towns in the occupied zone, on the understanding that the seat of the French government would remain in the free zone. The Marshal's entry into the occupied zone is intended, in his mind, to compensate for the loss of prestige that might result from M. Laval's return to the government.*

*3°) However, it is impossible for the Marshal to come to the occupied zone as long as the press in that zone continues to make such violent attacks on him and his government. Consequently, the Marshal would like the German authorities to allow the presence of a French delegate to the German control bodies. This delegate would have a purely preventive role, in that he or she would have the right to oppose the publication of articles that were insulting or embarrassing for the Marshal and his government.*

*4°) M. Laval would then be reinstated as Minister of State.*

*5°) He would be reinstated on the Steering Committee with functions to be specified between the interested parties.*

8 p.m. - Dinner at the Maréchal's with Admiral Fernet. After dinner, the Marshal takes me aside in a corner of the grand salon of the *Hôtel du Parc*. I think I sense a kind of anxiety in him that contrasts with his usual serenity. He complains once again about Laval's unworthy behavior.

- He was unforgivably rude to me," he declares.

But he immediately adds, in a lower voice, as if to temper this

statement:

- At least, that's what those around me assure me, because as far as I'm concerned, being a bit hard of hearing, I didn't hear everything.

I can see from this that the Marshal is, deep down, more eager than he'd like to admit to see things work out. I take this opportunity to point out to him the contradiction that seems to exist between paragraph 3 of the aide-memoire given to me by Admiral Darlan and his own statements.

- Mr. Marshal, you rightly consider that the Germans have no business interfering in the formation of the French government. Under these conditions, isn't it dangerous to make Laval's return dependent on Hitler's will?

- No, no," replied the Marshal, "I've thought long and hard about it. Forcing the Germans to take a stand is the only way for me to know where I stand. If Hitler doesn't care about Laval, let them stop talking to me about it. And if he does, let him say so openly and give him a dowry.

- A dowry?

- By this I mean that he concedes Laval advantages so dazzling that all of France understands why I took him back.

It's a tight game. But isn't that reversing the order of factors? Personally, I don't see why the Germans should pay "handsomely" for the return of a man whose policies embarrass them far more than they serve them. To do so, they would have to demonstrate an uncommon broadmindedness. Flandin pointed out to me that Franco-German policy should be raised above the petty level it has been dragging itself down since the armistice. "We must put an end to this kind of perpetual horse trading! I fully agree. But can we achieve this by constantly changing our interlocutor?

12:30 - I go to the Vichy station and take the train to Paris.

*January 12 - 10 a.m.* - Arrival in Paris.

11 a.m. - Telephone call to M. de Brinon, then to Scapini to inform them of the outcome of my efforts. I make an appointment with the German ambassador and ask Scapini to accompany me to rue de Lille.

4 p.m. - Scapini and I go to the German Embassy to inform Mr. Abetz of the decisions taken by the Steering Committee. Although



some passages irritate him - notably the cascade of conditions the Marshal places on Laval's return - Abetz considers that significant progress has been made. He decided to pass on the contents of the note immediately to M. von Ribbentrop and Chancellor Hitler, who were both in Berchtesgaden.

*January 13* - Around 11:30 a.m., I receive a phone call from M. de Brinon, asking me to visit him at Matignon. The atmosphere eased a little during the night. The delegate general in the occupied territories received a telephone message this morning from Major Baümelburg, the German liaison officer between the French delegation and the Hotel *Majestic*, informing him that the occupying authorities have decided to postpone, until further notice, the census of all French people between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. We welcome this news with a sigh of relief. But let's not be prematurely optimistic: what we have gained is merely a respite.

Scapini, informed of the latest state of affairs, felt that we should go ahead, without waiting for a reply from Berchtesgaden, which he did not think would be forthcoming any time soon.

- The question of Laval's return must be settled between the French," he asserted. If we have to ask the Germans for concessions, we can only get them afterwards.

He advises me to see the President without delay, to urge him to write the letter of apology the Marshal is waiting for. He will phone him on his own to urge him to make "this symbolic gesture".

*3.45pm* - Visit to Pierre Laval, who receives me in his office on the Champs-Élysées. He knows some of the steps I've taken in Vichy, which he follows with great skepticism. In his opinion, the Marshal will not reverse his decision.

He was therefore all the more surprised to learn from me that the Marshal was not rejecting the idea of a meeting with him (Scapini must have told him by telephone, but he probably didn't believe it). However, when I added that the head of state wished to receive an apology beforehand for the disrespectful way in which he had treated him, the President reared back and replied indignantly:

- Me, apologize to the Marshal? I thought it was his turn to apologize to me! Does he think it appropriate to have had me

arrested, after having extorted my resignation by surprise during a scene so humiliating that I wouldn't wish one on any of my enemies? Has the Marshal forgotten the role I played in Bordeaux and Vichy, first in favor of the armistice, then in getting the National Assembly to grant him full powers? Has he forgotten his satisfaction at my announcement of the Montoire meeting? All this - and much more besides - he forgets. But history will not forget, and will remember when it comes to weighing up the merits and demerits I

The President speaks with a passion and sincerity that's hard to resist. I understand only too well the reasons for his resentment. He was treated with an ingratitude that is hard to forgive. He was ousted from power at a time when he had every right to believe that he would finally reap the rewards of his efforts. An attempt was almost made on his life. And, to add insult to injury, he is now being asked to apologize!

As I listen to him, I compare the Marshal's marmoreal mask to the President's tormented face, which looks as if it were carved from Volvic stone, and I realize that these two men will never get along. But should the country be torn apart by their disagreements? I explain to the President that it's not a question of him "admitting guilt", but of sparing the Marshal's prestige by taking the first step.

- Prestige, prestige..." he exclaims. More like self-esteem! He's a stubborn old man...

- Call it what you will," I replied, "the words don't matter. This mark of magnanimity cannot diminish you. To bow down is not to stoop as mediocre souls believe, especially when it comes to bowing before the victor of Verdun. Believe me, such a gesture can only make you greater. It will show that you are above offenses.

I stop, not wanting to seem like I'm lecturing him. That would be inappropriate. Besides, I'm convinced he wouldn't tolerate it.

- The Marechal," I said, for want of another argument, "the Marechal to whom I spoke at length in Vichy, is not so far from acknowledging his own wrongs. Don't ask him to do it. His glory is too precious an asset to be tampered with.

- Still, it's costing me more than you think to write such a letter!" grumbles Laval, still defending himself. I want to give myself time to think...

- There's no hurry, Mr. President," I said, taking leave of him. You have plenty of time to think it over. But if you don't mind, I'll pick up the letter tomorrow evening.

- Tomorrow evening, we'll see...

A flash of mischief suddenly sparkles in his eyes.

*14 January, 11 a.m.:* I receive a phone call from Laval. He wants to think it over before writing to the Marshal. However, he thinks he'll be able to deliver the letter to me that evening.

All afternoon, I wait in vain for another phone call. I start to worry. Finally, at 7:30 p.m., the President calls me back. No, he still hasn't written his letter. Maybe he'll do it tomorrow. In any case, I can't go back to Vichy tonight.

As Scapini had predicted, there was still no reaction from Berchtesgaden. Hitler and Ribbentrop seem to have lost interest in the matter. According to M. de Brinon, Abetz was even asked to refrain from making any gesture in favor of Laval's return. The reinstatement of the former Council President was considered by the German authorities to be a purely French affair.

I'm beginning to wonder whether Laval will end up writing his letter, and whether the whole thing will come to nothing. That in itself would be of secondary importance, if the country weren't in the process of decomposing.

*15 January, 10 a.m.:* I receive a phone call from Laval, who tells me that he has finally written his letter and asks me to pick it up at his office on the Champs-Élysées around 3:30.

I arrive at his house at the appointed time. I find him much calmer than on my previous visit. He must have thought about my proposal, and finally considered that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

He pulls out a sheet of stationery from his blotter and insists on reading his text aloud to me. I protest. He insists even more. He warns me that he's made his point and wants to know my reaction.

In a deep, warm voice, he begins reading:

"I freely admit, Monsieur le Maréchal, that I gave free rein to my feelings during our last conversation, with a violence that did not conform to the requirements of protocol. But it was such a relief, after the treatment I had received in the previous days, that I

can't say, without lying, that I have the slightest regret...

Laval interrupts his reading and gives me a wry look over the top of his glasses.

- What a curious way to apologize!" I exclaim. It would be better not to write anything than to address such a letter to the Marshal! It can only make things worse...

- ... In Bordeaux, I spoke to President Lebrun in a different tone of voice - and Laval read on imperturbably - and he didn't hold it against me, even though he too was the head of state. He knew I was right. You yourself, Monsieur le Maréchal, were in no way shocked, no doubt because at the time my actions coincided with your own wishes.

- Oh no!" I said, stopping him with a gesture. If you want to send this letter to the Marshal, I can't stop you. But look for another intermediary than me to pass it on to him...

I can hardly conceal my irritation.

- Come on, don't get carried away," says Laval in a more conciliatory tone. If this letter doesn't seem to help, I'm willing to change it. You see, it was a relief to write it, and even more to read it aloud to you. Now that it's done, I'll write another one. Come back a little later. I want to write it with a clear head.

We agree to meet again at 6pm.

In the meantime, I take care of getting a new visa on my pass and return to the Champs-Élysées in the late afternoon.

- I've just finished my penum," says Laval gruffly. I hope you'll find it satisfactory this time.

I immediately rectify:

- I think you mean the Marshal's satisfaction.

The Chairman reads me his new text. It's certainly infinitely better than the previous one. But even so, it still contains a few scratches, and as for the "apologies", they are dispensed very sparingly. I'd suggest that he tone down a few more expressions, but having done so, I feel it's pointless asking him for more, for fear of angering him and calling the whole thing into question. There's no doubt that he put a lot of effort into writing this letter. It is now perfectly acceptable.

At 8.45pm, the envelope is finally sealed. I only have time to dash to the station, as the train leaves Austerlitz at 9:30 pm.

*January 16* - My journey continues smoothly to Moulins, where the German pass control takes place. We arrive at 3am. And then

the stupid incident...

The German NCO in charge of *Ausweiss* control demands that I search my briefcase and open the President's letter. I object categorically. I am removed from the train. Altercation with the German officer in charge of the checkpoint. Despite repeated requests, I refuse to open my satchel. I ask him to telephone the German embassy in Paris, where he will surely be ordered to let me cross the demarcation line without going through my papers. He tells me it's impossible, "you can't wake up an ambassador at this time of night". I complain that the staff at the Hotel *Majestic* didn't inform the Moulins station that I was coming. But letting a third party read the letter I'm carrying is out of the question. I'd rather tear it up. I don't want its contents to be divulged to all the German intelligence services, who could then use it for unforeseeable purposes.

For three hours, I walk up and down in the freezing cold in front of the control department barracks, guarded by two colossal Feldgendarmerie officers. And all the while, I feel my courage slowly slipping away. Not that I'm worried about the gendarmes. But I remember Laval's letter, and what seemed "satisfactory" in the Paris atmosphere seems more and more inadequate the closer I get to Vichy. The Marshal will never be satisfied with this. Laval's "apology" is surrounded by so much reticence that I'm afraid it will have the opposite effect to that expected.

At around 7 a.m., the German officer on duty calls me in and tells me in a gruff tone that he's been ordered to let me through without searching my briefcase. He gives me a furious look, as if I'd frustrated him with a succulent meal.

I jump on the first train to Vichy, arriving at 9.30 am.

At 10.15am, I'm back in the Marshal's office.

- I've brought you the letter of apology you asked for from President Laval," I told him, in an uncertain tone.

- It's not possible!" replies the Maréchal. He agreed to write it? Good for him. That's really very good of him.

- Here it is," I said to the Marshal, handing him the envelope.

He unsealed it, read the first lines, carefully folded the sheet and put it away in a drawer of his desk.

- Aren't you going to read it all the way through?" I asked him apprehensively, fearing he'd found it insufficiently respectful.

- Is this a letter of apology?" he asks me, as if to get

confirmation.

- Certainly, Monsieur le Maréchal. The President really put a lot of effort into writing it...

- It's all right," says the Marshal. Since you assure me it's a letter of apology, I won't ask for more. I prefer not to read it all the way through. If I happen to come across any unacceptable terms, that would be very unfortunate. Please tell the President that I thank him for his gesture.

I'm torn between two contradictory feelings: the admiration I feel for such a wise attitude, and the disappointment that I've gone to so much trouble to polish up the text of a letter that the Marshal may never read (although I'm convinced he will as soon as I turn my back. But he will no longer be able to declare it "unacceptable").

Meanwhile, the bailiff announces Admiral Darlan.

- Let him in," replies the Marshal.

- Admiral," he said, turning to the Chairman of the Steering Committee, "I've just received a very satisfactory letter from Laval. Yes, very satisfactory indeed.

The Marshal's happy expression shows me how eager he is to break the deadlock.

- I'm delighted," declares the Admiral, in a tone that surprises me with its dryness.

I think I detect a certain disappointment there...

- So there's nothing stopping me from meeting Mr Laval now, is there?

- Certainly, sir," replies the Admiral, who doesn't seem entirely convinced.

- We'll talk about it later," says the Marshal. For the moment, I'm hosting a delegation of lace-makers from Le Puy. They're young and pretty. All in all, a pleasant morning. It's been some time since this happened to me.

*1:15pm* - Lunch with the Marshal, who is in high spirits, accompanied by M. de Peyrecave, General Manager of Usines Renault. Mr. de Peyrecave hopes for the President's speedy return, and is pleased with the turn events are taking. The German military authorities are talking about requisitioning the Billancourt plants, and M. de Peyrecave hopes that M. Laval will find a way to avert this threat.

*5 p.m.* - Another meeting with General Huntziger. The Minister

of War has just received information that concerns him deeply. There's good reason for it. A German military control commission is on its way to Casablanca, where it is due to arrive on the 21st. The armistice provides for this mission. But, in the absence of any conversation with the Germans, it is impossible to know in what state of mind it is coming, or what instructions it has been given prior to its departure. General Huntziger was frightened by her arrival in Morocco and feared that it would have unfortunate repercussions on public opinion in North Africa. He would have liked her installation to be delayed until agreement could be reached with the Germans on the exact scope of her powers. He would also have liked it to be headed by a civilian, to liaise more discreetly with General Noguès\*.

General Charles Noguès (1876-1971). Collaborator of Lyautey, Resident General in Morocco in 1936. Allied with Marshal Pétain in 1940, he ordered French troops to resist the Allied landings in November 1942. Retired to Portugal after the war.

General Huntziger expands on the situation in North Africa, when Admiral Darlan appears. The three-way conversation continued. The Minister of the Navy explains that he is grappling with difficulties that seem to exceed the competence of the Armistice Commission. The latter had just returned to Admiral Michelier \* a request made by our Admiralty for the transport of material to Dakar. This involves steel plates and various parts needed to refurbish the *Richelieu*, which was seriously damaged following the Anglo-Gaullist attack last July. In his opinion, it would be a good idea to hasten the planned meeting between the Marshal and Laval. Perhaps it would then be easier to have conversations "at a higher level". Since December 13, no French minister has been allowed to cross the demarcation line.

Admiral Darlan leaves us to go and see the Marshal and try to get him to set a date for the meeting, which he is now fully committed to. Meanwhile, General Huntziger continues his presentation on North Africa. His beautiful blue eyes come to life as he describes the loyalty of the African people.

- If there's one consolation in all this," he tells me, "it's to see how much the Marshal is respected on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Admiral Darlan returns after half an hour. He informs me that the Marshal proposes to meet Pierre Laval on Saturday January 18th, at 4pm, at the small railway station of Varennes-sur-Allier, a

few kilometers from Vichy. The Maréchal will come in a lounge car. President Laval will be able to join him by road.

*8:15pm* - Dinner with the Maréchal. In attendance, in addition to the Maréchale, are Mme Gaston Doumergue, who is arriving from Tourne- feuille, Prince and Princess Poniatowski, M. de Peyrecave and a few other guests. The atmosphere is clearly relaxed.

But in Vichy, the news of the Marshal's imminent meeting with Laval spread like wildfire. While some were pleased, others made no secret of their disappointment. They feared that Laval would return to government and call them to account for their attitude towards him.

- I expect to see you at Varennes," said the Maréchal, taking leave of me. I see you have influence over Laval. I hope your presence will prevent him from making a splash.

- Make no mistake, Mr. Marshal. I have no influence over the President. And you have, I assure you, nothing to fear.

I leave Vichy at 10.30 a.m., en route for Paris.

*January 17, 9 a.m.* - Arrival in Paris.

*10 a.m.* - After briefing Mr. Scapini, I telephone Mr. Laval to inform him of the Marshal's decision. The former President of the Council has already been informed by a telephone call from M. de Brinon. However, during the night, the venue of the meeting was changed: it would not take place in Varennes, but in La Ferté-Hautenville. Laval asks to see me this afternoon.

No reaction has yet been reported from the Reich's ruling circles. On the other hand, the press in the occupied zone has muted its attacks on the Marshal and Vichy circles.

*3 p.m.* - I go to see President Laval. He's obviously pleased with the favorable reception his letter has received. (I'm careful not to tell him that the Marshal didn't read it all the way through.) He must also be pleased - or so I imagine - to have obtained the result he was hoping for without having bowed too low. If his letter is ever published, it won't diminish him.

But, in this cursed affair, every time one obstacle is overcome, another emerges that threatens to derail everything. The Marshal chose La Ferté-Hautenville, in the southern zone, because he couldn't, and didn't want to, come to the occupied zone. Laval, for his part, refused to go to the free zone.



- I don't want to fall into another trap," he says. I don't trust anyone anymore, after what happened to me. Remember how I was arrested in Vichy, by the Ministry of the Interior's protection groups, and then held in custody in Châteldon by men armed with machine guns, who looked terrible! There were a dozen of them lying in my living room. I don't want that to happen again...

The President was obviously traumatized by December 13. I try to allay his fears by assuring him that they are groundless.

- Let's see, the Marshal isn't Louis XI," I said. You're not John the Fearless, and La Ferté-Hauterive isn't Montereau!

He smiles, and that's for the best. If he were to remain in the same mood, the interview could turn sour. One even wonders how the two interlocutors would manage to meet, if they both refused to leave their respective zones.

- So, accompany me to La Ferté-Hauterive," he asks. Your presence will protect me from a second lookout...

I tell him that the Marshal has made me the same proposal, as he fears an outburst on his part and that I cannot decently grant him what I have just refused the Marshal.

This time, he bursts out laughing, a frank, relaxed laugh.

- Me, make a scene? But don't even think about it...

I take my leave of him, considering that my role is now over. The Marshal and the President must speak without witnesses. He agrees with me that my presence in La Ferté-Hauterive is superfluous.

I leave Laval at 5pm, just as Mr. Langeron, Prefect of Police, comes to finalize the details of his trip with him.

*January 18, 4 p.m.* - The planned interview takes place in La Ferté-Hauterive, in the Marshal's lounge car. It lasts an hour and three quarters. The only witness present was M. du Moulin de Labarthète. The principle of a press release was agreed. It will no doubt appear in tomorrow's newspapers.



This concludes my "Diary of La Ferté-Hauterive". What exactly the Marshal and Pierre Laval said to each other in the Head of State's lounge car, no one will ever know. Today, the three men who took part in the scene are dead. Neither Le Maréchal, Laval nor du Moulin left any record of the conversation. No minutes

were ever drawn up. Only a terse communiqué, published on January 19, 1941, stated "that the two men had met; that the misunderstandings which had troubled their relations had been cleared up, and that they had agreed to consult each other at short intervals".

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In truth, the head of state and the former head of government had been unable to reach agreement because their views diverged on certain essential points. Laval could not be satisfied with the role of Minister of State; the Marshal was unshakeably determined not to entrust him with either the Ministry of the Interior or that of Foreign Affairs, which would deprive him of all negotiating power. What's more, certain Vichy personalities hostile to the President had intervened at the last minute to beg the Head of State to stand firm and maintain in full all the conditions he had set for the President's return.

As a result, a ■ moral reconciliation" was possible; a "political agreement -< was not. However, the terrible problems we faced demanded an answer. It was then that I suggested to Marshal Pétain that Admiral Darlan should take the helm.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BATTLE

(February - April 1941)

Although the ground had been cleared, the formation of the Darlan government ran into unforeseen difficulties. Not on the French side. After a series of consultations, the Marshal had come to the conclusion that, in the absence of Parliament, the wisest course was to base power on the only two real forces left in the country: his personal authority, which remained immense, despite the attacks he had been subjected to in the Paris press, and the navy, which remained our major asset. As Darlan was already President of the Executive Board, his appointment to the Vice-Presidency of the Council did not entail any profound changes.

But the same could not be said of the German side. The day after December 13, Abetz had rushed to Vichy at the head of a line of armored cars to protect Laval and bring him back to Paris. He now considered it a breach of loyalty to consent to his ouster from the government, and hoped that this would only be temporary. He therefore demanded that nothing in the structure of the new cabinet should stand in the way of his return, which he hoped would be swift. To this end, he wanted the Admiral not to appoint anyone to the portfolios Laval was claiming - the Interior, Foreign Affairs and Information - but to keep them to himself, so as to be able to return them to him more or less at a moment's notice. Basically, this demand in no way contradicted

the Admiral's wishes. Already holder of the Ministry of the Navy, he would thus have the upper hand in French politics.

Once this problem had been solved, other difficulties arose. The Admiral did not want his government to look like a transitional cabinet. Moreover, he wanted to be sure that his constitution would bring things back to where they had been before December 13, i.e. that the German authorities would grant him the same advantages as his predecessor. To this end, he called for the reactivation of the Scapini mission and the possibility for its members to enter into direct contact with our prisoners; a relaxation of the demarcation line, allowing "technical" ministers to come to the occupied zone and take over their administrations; and the establishment of government control over the press in the occupied zone, to prevent the return of attacks similar to those which had been unleashed in recent weeks.

- As for me," added the Marshal, "I would like the Germans to make a symbolic gesture sufficient to convince the population that the period opened by December 13th is definitively over.

In his mind, this gesture would consist in allowing him to make an official trip to the occupied zone and the right to reside from time to time in Versailles.

The Admiral entrusted me with the task of negotiating these various points with the Rue de Lille. It was a thorny task, for Abetz's face darkened as he heard me enumerate all these conditions.

- You're turning the tables! You've come to ask me to concede you advantages, to get you out of the inextricable situation you've got yourselves into! We should be asking you for advantages. Do you realize what you've done? The damage is enormous. And you want us to be the ones to repair it?

It was a logical response. But fortunately I had a few trump cards to play against it.

- If there's anyone who can measure the extent of the damage," I tell him, "it's me. Haven't I done everything possible in recent weeks to mitigate the effects? What's more, I'm in a better position than anyone to understand the Führer's anger, for reasons I won't go into. But remember also that when you phoned me at 1 a.m. on December 11th to tell me that the ashes of the King of Rome were to be taken back to Paris, I told you

verbatim: "I beg you, don't do this! I feel we are heading for new misfortunes!" You didn't listen. Don't you also share some of the responsibility?

Abetz looked dreamy. He seemed undecided.

- Still, if Laval could come back, it would make things a lot easier...

- Don't insist. Laval cannot return, at least for the time being. I became convinced of this during my interventions in Vichy. Don't persist in trying to impose it on the Marshal. It could only be a source of further misfortune. Give the Admiral a chance, it's the best solution. But don't let him struggle in a vacuum. Provide him with the means to "get the train back on track".

It would be tedious to go into the details of the negotiations that lasted from January 30 to February 25. In the end, Abetz agreed to the reactivation of the Scapini mission, permission for the "technical" ministers to come to Paris, and the appointment of a delegate to the main Parisian press organs. But when I raised the possibility of a trip by the Marshal to the occupied zone, he turned a deaf ear.

- Let the Admiral form his government first," he tells me. Then we'll see.

The Marshal and the Admiral were in a hurry to get it over with. For two months, France had been without a government. Administrations worked in disarray, and the Wiesbaden armistice commission took advantage of the interregnum to multiply its demands. It demanded more and more butter, milk, wagons and bauxite, and had even requested a complete armament plan. It was time to stem this rising tide.

On February 28, 1941, the new cabinet was finally constituted. The Admiral had offered me the post of Deputy Secretary General of the Government, with the rank of State Councillor. The incumbent was my old friend Henri Moysset', who had been one of the masters

■ Henri Moysset (1875-1949). A brilliant intellectual and specialist in Germany and Proudhon, he was the éminence grise of several leading figures between the wars, including Georges Leygues and Tardieu, for whom he was chief of staff. Chief of staff and then Secretary General to Admiral Darlan from July 1940 to August 1941, he became Minister of State from August 1941 to April 1942. After this date, he remained a close friend of Marshal Pétain, on whom he had a moderating influence.

of the Admiral at the Naval School. I knew him well, having met him at a publisher's, where he was overseeing the publication of

Proudhon's complete works. He was a Cévenol full of verve, with a rocky accent, but lazy as a bedfellow. When he saw the list of cabinet members, some of whom, like Caziot, Barthélémy and Carcopino, were in their fifties, while others, like Pucheu, Lehideux, Marion \*\*\*\*\* and myself, were young people still unknown to the public, he couldn't help but say to the Admiral:

- Your government reminds me of the name of the large café in Cégalas, my hometown.

- What's his name?

- To the old Romans and the new cyclists.

We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

"

In fact, I had initially turned down the position offered to me by the Admiral, as I found the atmosphere in Vichy very unpleasant. This little spa town seemed to me a hotbed of intrigue, with everyone pulling out all the stops. All I wanted to do was return to Berlin to look after the prisoners. Then, on reflection, I changed my mind.

The release of the prisoners depended, first and foremost, on the attitude of the government. If the government were agitated by new upheavals like those we had just experienced, all my efforts would be in vain. I therefore had to avoid them, and my presence with the Marshal could not have been in vain. It was in Vichy, not Berlin, that I could best serve them.

By the time I got Jean Lombard back to Paris to help me set up my practice, we'd moved into the Ministry of Agriculture, which, for some reason, was unoccupied. I can still see the beautiful empty rooms of this ravishing 18th century hotel\*, where our voices tinkled the crystal girandoles. Not a curtain, not a hanging, not a seat, not an inkwell. It was freezing cold. A light snow covered the garden lawns. Everything had to be set up from scratch. Not just in terms of personnel and equipment. But also in terms of working methods.

For I soon realized, to my great surprise, that when faced with German demands, our administration was working in appalling disarray. And understandably so. Requests were coming in from everywhere at once: from the German military command in France, from the various local "Kommandanturs", from the

armistice commission in Wiesbaden, from the Reich's central supply office, and from the countless German purchasing offices that had sprung up all over the place. What's more, because the requests were so diverse in nature, they all ended up with different ministries: the Ministry of Agriculture, when it came to meat, butter and food products; Industrial Production, when it came to coal, iron or cement; Public Works and Transport, when it came to wagons, locomotives or trucks, etc. So everyone complained about German levies, but no one could tell me what we'd actually delivered to the Reich since the armistice was signed.

As soon as my cabinet was formed, we left the Ministry of Agriculture for the Hôtel Matignon. There, my first task was to send a circular to each of the ministers and organizations concerned, asking them to send me, as soon as possible, a statement of their supplies since June 22, 1940. I then collated the various files to establish the total amount.

When I got my hands on the overall balance sheet, I was appalled: France was literally being auctioned off. What she had provided to the Reich, in various capacities, went far beyond the stipulations of the armistice. But in a way, I wasn't angry about it. Until now, I'd had nothing in my hands: nothing to fall back on, no weapon to defend myself with. Now I had the cornerstone on which to base my negotiations. There was no reason for us to deliver this mass of raw materials and manufactured goods without getting something in return. We had to dam up the river, regain control of it and *exchange what was for the Germans an immediate advantage for what was for us a long-term advantage*, i.e. a series of guarantees concerning our future and likely to erase in stages the consequences of our defeat.

When I spoke to the Admiral and the Marshal, they approved of this approach. But I made no secret of the fact that it would be tricky, perhaps even dangerous, at least to begin with. The Germans would not be happy to see us take over what had previously escaped us, even though they had no valid arguments against us. Nevertheless, it was essential to put up a barrier, if only to raise the level of negotiation. Of course, I wasn't foolish enough to believe that a simple exchange of trucks or bauxite would enable us to recover everything we'd lost. We'd probably have to throw something else into the mix. But the question

would only arise at a later stage. The Marshal agreed, and at the end of my presentation, the Admiral had a kind word for the "new cyclist".

In the meantime, I had learned that there was an office in Vichy responsible for issuing licenses for all exported materials and objects. Up to now, it had been content to automatically fill in all the forms presented to it. That was good enough for me! This would be the tap through which we could control the volume of our services.

On my return to Paris, I asked for an appointment with General von Stulpnagel, military commander in France, who was responsible for the Wehrmacht's economic services (an area in which the Rue de Lille embassy had no business intervening). He received me at the Hotel *Majestic*. Thin and wiry, his torso strapped into a reseda jacket and his lips topped by a small brush mustache, I found him to bear a certain resemblance to Baron de Crac. I drew his attention to the anomaly of the situation and informed him - as gently as I could - that "we couldn't go on like this, that we'd have to impose certain restrictions on the granting of licenses, otherwise the country would soon be empty".

The general had looked at me with a wry smile.

- I hope you don't mind," I added, a little disconcerted by the ease with which he seemed to take the matter.

- Not at all, not at all. On the contrary! he replied. It will simplify our task. Thank you very much.

- Are you thanking me? I really don't see...

- Yes, it was! The export license system was accepted by the armistice commission at the request of the French delegates. It's a favor we've granted them, an act of self-satisfaction. If Vichy wants to apply restrictive measures to it, we'll do away with it altogether. There will be no more licenses. That's all there is to it.

- But won't this lead to a freeze on benefits?

- What blockage?" retorted the general in an increasingly ironic tone. You've got to be kidding! No more licenses, no more controls! Products and goods will enter Germany freely.

- And if the government objects?

- Oppose what? Mr. General Secretary, you're not there at all! We're besieged all day long by French industrialists begging us to abandon the licensing system and deal directly with them, without going through Vichy. That's how we'll proceed from now



on.

I left the *Majestic* Hotel deeply mortified. Furious, too, with myself. Before taking this step, I should have made sure that all our industrialists would "stick" to the government, that they would refuse to sell their products to the Germans without a license. This was assuming a discipline and civic sense they didn't possess.

But I soon realized that my spite was doing me an injustice. Industrialists had businesses to safeguard. If they slowed down, or stopped working, they would be forced to lay off some or all of their staff, which would put just as many workers out of work. It was all a lot more complicated than I'd imagined. However, as I was stubborn, I didn't give up on my plan. I kept the method, even if it meant shifting the points of application. But I had still suffered a defeat...

\*

On the Rue de Lille, on the other hand, things were going a little better. Abetz had begun to feel a certain sympathy for Darlan, whose clarity of mind and straightforward language he appreciated. He felt that the new government had got through its probationary period satisfactorily, and that it was time to put "the train back on the tracks".

But it was one thing not to oppose the formation of the Darlan government; it was quite another to get the train back on track, as this involved renewing the dialogue inaugurated at Montoire. The ambassador felt he could not do this without the authorization of his minister and the Reich Chancellor. To obtain it, he intended to make a stopover in Berlin, and asked me to accompany him on this "exploratory trip", during which he would arrange meetings for me with M. von Ribbentrop, Admiral Raeder ♦, General Thomas and Field Marshall

■ Grand Admiral Erich Raeder (1876-1960). Commander of the Kriegsmarine since 1938. Despite demonstrating his independence from Hitler, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at Nuremberg. Released in 1955.

Keitel. Having obtained the agreement of Admiral Darlan, who had high expectations of these initial contacts, I embarked with Abetz for Berlin on the morning of April 4.

My first appointment was with M. von Ribbentrop. The Reich Foreign Minister received me at 4 p.m. on April 5, in his office on Wilhelmstrasse, the same one where I had seen him in November 1938. Back then, he had struck me above all for his lack of imagination and the impression of emptiness he gave off. This time, I was struck by the coldness of his welcome and the self-assurance of his demeanor.

- I sometimes wonder whether Germany and France aren't irreconcilable enemies forever," he says by way of preamble. Every time we've made a gesture of appeasement or taken a step in her direction, France has responded with the opposite. Whatever the men at its helm, right or left, it's always the same story. In 1919, Clemenceau wanted to found French hegemony on our ruins. That's why he dismembered us, tied us up and reduced us to impotence. In 1923, with the occupation of the Ruhr, Poincaré wanted to push this policy of destruction even further by hastening our ruin. In 1930, in Geneva, when we demanded equal rights, Paul-Boncour turned us down. In 1934, at the Disarmament Conference, Barthou slammed the door in our face, destroying any hope of reaching a general agreement. In 1935, just as we were beginning to recover, Laval rushed off to Moscow to sign a pact with Stalin...

I made a gesture, intending to make an observation, but he motioned with his hand not to interrupt.

- Let me do the talking! In 1936, when our Führer made France the peace offers you know about, Herriot and Flandin preferred to throw themselves into the arms of the Russians. A few days later, when we remilitarized the left bank of the Rhine to ward off the danger posed by this new state of affairs, Flandin ran to London to get permission from the British to attack us<sup>r</sup>. To dissuade him, Eden and Halifax had to hold him by the scruff of the neck. In 1938, when I went to Paris to sign a non-aggression pact with Georges Bonnet, they acted as if the document were a "rag of paper". In 1939, you declared war on us, even though your territory was in no way threatened. After our victory over Poland, we sent you new peace proposals: you turned a deaf ear. In 1940, we crushed you. In thirty-eight days, our troops reached Bidasoa. Despite all this, the Führer still wanted to reach out to you. On October 28, he met Pétain in Montoire, to try and find common ground. Then, on December 13, just as he was about to

perform a generous act for you...

(There you go! He finally realized that the return of L'Aiglon's ashes could be important!)

... Marshal Pétain inflicted a scathing slap in the face on him and ousted Laval from the government under the pretext that he was trying to get along with us... Don't you find all this discouraging? At the moment, I know there's nothing you can do. But how do I know you won't do it again at the first opportunity?

What was the point of exhuming this long catalog of grievances? This indictment, delivered in a monotone voice, paralyzed me. I felt like I was bound in a straitjacket. For while it was true that the facts Ribbentrop enumerated were indisputable, they were nonetheless imbued with a crude Manichaeism. But at the same time, something inside me became angry. I hadn't come to Berlin just to hear myself berated like that! The only way out was not to resort to argumentation, but to put the debate on a different footing.

- Excellency, I've listened to you without interrupting," I said. And yet, allow me to say that I don't share your opinion.

Ribbentrop had made a gesture of surprise. He was far too aware of his superiority to admit that anyone disagreed with him and, above all, dared to tell him so.

- How so?

- All the examples you have cited are borrowed from a deplorable system: the one that emerged from the Treaty of Versailles. It's a fatal spiral that nearly destroyed us all - you first, then us. It's because we clung to it for too long that we ended up where we are today. But today, that system no longer exists. It's an abolished, pulverized, vanished world. The Treaty of Versailles is on the ground. You destroyed it yourself. So there's no need to look any further for our terms of reference. The ground is empty, cleared, ready for the future. Let's establish our relations on something entirely new.

- Of course, this could be defended... But we've been deceived so many times! Who do you expect me to trust?

- No man in particular. Faced with identical situations, they will all react in the same way. Place your trust in the right balance of things...

I don't remember much about the rest of this conversation, which lasted almost two hours, and it's impossible for me, thirty

years later, to reconstruct it from memory. It would be both inaccurate and untrue. Why does so little of it survive? Firstly, I made the mistake of not taking notes immediately after the interview, as is my custom. But I was exhausted. For more than three months, I'd been constantly on the go. Then there was Ribbentrop himself, whose thinking was vague and hard to pin down. He was fond of commonplaces, and commonplaces are the hardest thing to remember. He was totally lacking in unexpectedness and warmth. I tried my best to animate him, to shake him up, but it was difficult, because I knew he was very infatuated with himself. Nevertheless, I remember saying this to him:

- Victory is not what is commonly believed: a simple increase in territory and power. It invests the victor with a historical responsibility. If he fails to carry out the task for which this extra power was conferred, history takes it away from him, and hands it over to others.

(I knew this wasn't his usual language, but I'm saying it anyway, because I wanted to have said it). And then this again:

- Don't underestimate the exceptional nature of your victory. Your Führer came to power on the double. In just a few years, he put Germany back on its feet and literally transformed it. This was clearly demonstrated during the Olympic Games. After that, he took Europe by storm. Destroying France's military apparatus and going from Sedan to the Pyrenees in thirty-eight days has never happened before in our history! Don't take this opportunity to impose a peace of vengeance on us. Let your imagination match the power of your weapons and the bravery of your soldiers. Make a peace of which all peoples can say: it's the peace of us all.

And finally this:

- I'm convinced that you've fought a revolutionary war, and that the peace that follows will be revolutionary too. Don't shatter that hope, because you won't just shatter it in me; you'll shatter it in many others. If I thought that this war - like all those that preceded it - was a war of conquest and subjugation, I wouldn't be here, because my duty would be to continue the fight against you.

Unfortunately, I don't remember Ribbentrop's answers. I only

know that he took these last words more calmly than I expected. I even have the impression that he nodded in agreement. Finally, his attitude was much more open and friendly than at first.

- I'm willing to make a last-ditch effort to break the deadlock," he said, sighing. Tell Admiral Darlan that I have no prejudices against him. Since, as Abetz assures me, he wants to "get the train back on track", I won't stand in his way. I'm even willing to resume dialogue.

It was all I could hope for: the after-effects of December 13 seemed to have worn off. Yet I wasn't naive enough to imagine that it was my words that had convinced him. His attitude was dictated by other preoccupations that had come to the fore during our conversation.

This was primarily due to the fact that he had no sympathy for Laval. Unlike Abetz, who remained very attached to the mayor of Aubervilliers because he had been the first to give concrete content to his mission in Paris. Ribbentrop did not forgive him for the Franco-Russian pact of 1935, and was wary of a man who had been praised all too highly for being a hard-headed peasant. Finally, he feared the void that would ensue if the discouraged Admiral in turn relinquished the vice-presidency of the Council, and dreaded the consequences his withdrawal might have on the behavior of our fleet. I don't think I'm

He asked me several times about it. Needless to say, I was careful not to allay his fears. On the contrary, I congratulated him on the penetration of his judgment.

My meeting with Keitel had also been very difficult, but in a different way. I hadn't pleaded the Admiral's cause with him, but that of our prisoners. The Chief of the General Staff was, after Hitler, the most senior figure in the German military hierarchy. He didn't wear an impenetrable mask like Ribbentrop, and was much easier to talk to. Very tall, with rugged features and a clean-cut body, he was of a similar build to General Giraud. It would be inaccurate to say that he had no political sense: he didn't want to have any. No doubt he felt that the rules of his profession exempted him from thinking.

- In wartime," he replied (this time, I had taken notes), "the

problem is not to free prisoners, but to capture as many as possible. Letting prisoners return to their homes, until peace is signed, may be a political act. But it's a military mistake. On the one hand, they can take up arms against us; on the other, it weakens the morale of our own troops. Our soldiers are saying to themselves: "What's the point of risking our lives to take prisoners, only to release them straight away? Add to this the fact that our troops have to continue the war, while the defeated return home in peace. It seems unfair to them. Before they come to prefer their fate..."

"But here we are! In this war, nothing happens as usual. What am I supposed to do with two million French prisoners? They encumber me. I have to house them, guard them, feed them, look after them when they're sick. This ties up considerable manpower that could be put to better use elsewhere. And there's no profit in it, since the prisoners' work is of infinitesimal value. I wouldn't mind giving some of them back to you, especially the old, sick and crippled men, but on one condition: that they be released in dribs and drabs, so that neither the German civilian population nor the Wehrmacht notice.

I retorted that I wanted exactly the opposite: that as many of them as possible be released en masse, and that their return be given maximum publicity. This was the only way to give French public opinion a psychological jolt and boost the popularity of Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan. But it was a point of view he refused to consider.

- I've already told you," Keitel repeated, "the return of prisoners is not a military act: it's a political act. So it's not up to me, but to the Führer. I'm just a soldier. If the Führer gives me an order, I'll carry it out scrupulously.

I didn't insist any further. I felt I was wasting my time and that I wouldn't be able to stir up this honest but heavy dough.

\*

Much more interesting was my conversation with Admiral Raeder. The face of the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine was fine and incisive. His eyes had the slightly sad acuity of men of the sea. He had high regard for Admiral Darlan, who had succeeded in giving France the most powerful fleet it

had had since the reign of Louis XV. He saw him less as an adversary than as a colleague. There is a kind of Freemasonry among sailors. It stems from the fact that naval crews don't just fight other men. Day after day, they face the same implacable, savage adversary: the sea. It's their struggle against the same element that underpins their solidarity. So I found certain common traits in both: circumspection, an ever-watchful vigilance and a broader view of the world than that of most landlubbers. This confirms what Darlan has often told me: a general can lose a battle without any consequences, because on land, any turnaround is possible. On the other hand, an admiral can lose an empire in an afternoon: Aboukir and Trafalgar are proof of this.

- A lot of people back home think the war is over," Raeder told me. I don't think so. England is a maritime power. As long as we have not defeated her in her own element, the sea, all surprises are possible. Hence the vital importance of the Mediterranean. We won't bring England to her knees by air raids or submarine warfare. She won't feel truly affected until we've taken Suez. But before we can take Suez, we need to eliminate Gibraltar and Malta, and gain serious footholds in Dakar and Bizerte. This is where France can still play a considerable role.

That was interesting. For that was exactly how Darlan reasoned. That's why he expected to be faced with a German ultimatum on Bizerte any day now.

- You're the only person in Germany I've ever heard talk like that," I replied to Raeder.

- That's the trouble! I do my best to convince the Führer, but without much success. Hitler is really only interested in land operations. Naval operations seem secondary to him. He seems to fear the sea. Or at least underestimates its importance. He only thinks of Russia...

- Does he intend to attack it?

- Oh no, surely not. It would be the last mistake to make, as long as the English are masters of the Mediterranean. For the Italians, on their own, are no match for them.

My meeting with General Thomas was also very interesting,

even though my visit to him at the Ministry of the Economy was not, strictly speaking, part of my fact-finding mission.

He was a salt-and-pepper-haired man in his fifties, who looked less like a military man than a captain of industry. The Germans had given him the nickname "General Motors", because Hitler had put him in charge of motorizing the Reich, a task he was carrying out in conjunction with Goering's four-year plan. His strategy was not one of battlefields: it was one of supplies, production, raw materials and fuels. His dream was to transform the whole of Europe into a motorized citadel. He would have liked to synchronize French production with German production, and assured me that he met with "a great deal of understanding on the part of French industrialists", which echoed what General Stulpnagel had told me. This energetic man played a vital, if invisible, role in the conduct of the war. It was he who kept all the German factories running at an accelerated pace, whose production curves he proudly showed me.

- It's not enough to make machines: you also need the steel to produce them, and the fuel to run them. My field covers the economy, finance, industrial production and foreign affairs.

As a result, he was in control of all the Reich's supplies. He was not primarily interested in the Mediterranean, but in the U.S.S.R. as the Reich's main supplier of strategic raw materials.

- We have an impregnable position on the continent," he told me. All our needs are 100% covered for a year and a half. Our iron and oil stocks are constantly increasing. We owe this primarily to Stalin.

- Stalin?

- Here, take a look!

He then unfolded before my eyes a large sheet of squared paper, listing all the deliveries made by Russia since September 1939. There were huge quantities of wheat, coal, fats, manganese, petroleum and many other products listed in several columns.

- And the iron?

- No. Russian iron is inferior. Russian iron is inferior. We prefer to source it from Scandinavia.

I had already witnessed the strength of German metallurgy during the occupation of the Ruhr. I remembered a certain inspection at the Krupp works in Essen, which gave me the



impression of visiting Vulcan's forges. But it seemed to me that this strength had increased tenfold since 1923.

- Do you consider the Russian contribution to your war effort to be significant?

- No, not important: capital! Without the U.S.S.R., we'd never have achieved such potential.

- And you have no problems with the Soviet authorities?

- None whatsoever. Stalin personally sees to it that all the clauses of the Pact are scrupulously respected.

- How do you explain this?

- Stalin held on to the Pact like the apple of his eye.

And, after a moment's reflection, he added:

- Stalin's desire would be to conclude a military alliance with us and Japan. Fear, you see, is often a good advisor.

When I left Berlin, the man who had given me the most striking notion of German power was not Ribbentrop, Keitel or Raeder. It was General Thomas. When I thought of this formidable war machine, I wondered how the small armed commandos set up by the Free French could ever get to grips with it. American industry was the only thing that could compete with it...

My interview with General Motors had been brief. Yet everything he had said and shown me had given me a lot to think about.

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## CHAPTER V

## THE PREDICTION FULFILLED

(April 15, 1941)

Returning to Matignon on the morning of April 14, I telephoned Admiral Darlan to tell him about the results of my mission to Berlin. I made no secret of the fact that my conversations had been difficult, but that the impression I had gained was rather favorable. In particular, I repeat Ribbentrop's assurance that he was "ready to resume dialogue".

- A la bonne heure!" exclaimed Darlan. All in all, the ties broken by December 13th were renewed?

- Just about.

- Have you seen Raeder?

- Yes.

- How does he see the situation?

- I can't tell you that over the phone. I'm planning to come to Vichy tomorrow to give you a more detailed report.

- All right, then. I'll expect you in the evening, from 6pm. In the meantime, I'll be off to the La Ciotat shipyards.

On the morning of April 15, I get ready to hit the road. My car and driver Marceau are waiting for me in the courtyard. My luggage is already in the boot. It's light, as I now have a room and offices at the *Hôtel du Parc*.

Just then, the usher announces a visitor I wasn't expecting. It's Werner Pieht, Curtius's brother-in-law and close friend of Stephan George and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. He's wearing a commander's uniform, as he's currently the historiographer of 1<sup>o</sup>.K.W. He's the one who writes the official communiqués that the radio broadcasts morning and night. As the Balkan campaign seems to be drawing to a close, he has taken the opportunity to take a few days' leave.

- I've come to spend them in France," he tells me, "the France I love so much and haven't seen since the beginning of hostilities.

Then he asks me about Gide, Valéry and Martin du Gard, whom he met a few years ago at a decade at Pontigny.

He has a thousand things to tell me from my German friends, with whom I've lost all contact since August 1939. I'm glad to see him again, but I have to cut it short, as the car is waiting.

- I'll see you at greater length when I return from Vichy.

- When will you be back?

- In a week or so.

- Alas, I'll be off again. I'm due back at headquarters on

Monday. God knows when we'll meet again! Perhaps never...

. He looks really disappointed. And it saddens me to leave him like this. So, moved by a sudden impulse, I say to him:

- Why don't you hop in my car and we'll go for a drive together? That way we'll have time to talk quietly. I'll drop you off in Moulins. You can return to Paris on the evening train.

He immediately accepts and off we go.

It's my first relaxing day in weeks. I'm feeling light-headed.

- What wonderful weather! Look at that sky!

A flight of swallows streaks the azure with high-pitched cries. Arriving at Boulevard des Invalides, I said to my driver:

- Marceau, don't take the road to Montargis. It's pointless. Let's head for Orléans. From there, we'll follow the river to the left. We're in no hurry anyway.

The countryside is incomparably beautiful. All you see in the fields are apple and cherry blossoms. Spring is everywhere: on the hedges, on the hills, in the throats of the birds. As we approach the Loire valley, Péguy's verses chime in my head:

*Orléans, Beaugency,  
Notre-Dame de Cléry  
Vendôme, Vendôme...*

At Châteauneuf, I stop the car.

- France's most beautiful rhododendrons are here, but few people know it. Let's go and see if they're in bloom. I wouldn't be surprised, as it's very early in the season.

We pass through a high wrought-iron gate in the purest Louis XIV style. It seems to give access to some princely castle. But there is no castle: it must have flown away, as in fairy tales, and its absence lends the landscape something mysterious. The gate opens onto nothing.

What am I saying, nothing? It opens onto a profusion of rhododendrons that are beginning to bloom, an avalanche of corollas streaming towards the river, whose waters flow lazily a hundred meters below. Planted in espaliers, they must be very old, as their branches meet above our heads. We walk along avenues that seem to be carved out of tunnels of greenery. As for the flowers, they range from light pink to crimson, passing through all the shades of flame: yellow, saffron, orange, mauve, scarlet and violet.

- What a sight!" exclaims Werner. I've never seen anything like

it. It's like Armide's gardens!

We take lunch a kilometer further on, at a small restaurant whose terrace, decorated with climbing plants, overlooks the Loire. It rests on stilts against which the water splashes gently. How pleasant it is here! Werner, Marceau and I settle down around a table. I order fried perch and a bottle of Vouvray. We'll see later. Is it the transparency of the light or the freshness of the wine? I feel the kind of enchantment I experienced here in my youth coming back to me.

Suddenly, I don't know why, I turn to Marceau and ask him point-blank:

- Tell me, Marceau, was your father a patriot?

Marceau, astonished, stares at me with his good round face.

- Patriot, Father? I think so. We're five brothers. The eldest is called Kleber, the second Hoche, the third Cambronne, and I'm called Marceau. The last was to be called Robespierre. But his name is Jean.

- Why?

- Because my father was away!

I burst out laughing. I can see the poor mother rushing to the town hall and taking advantage of her husband's absence to give her newborn a less sonorous name.

- That's not true, Marceau! You have a brother almost named Robespierre, and another named Cambronne? I wish I had a chauffeur named Cambronne. Just for the pleasure of shouting out loud: "Cambronne! There's no gas in the tank!" What does he do now?

- He's a shoemaker in Douai. My family is from the Nord.

From his wallet, he pulls out a photo showing the five sons grouped around a miners' household. The mother is wearing a pretty white lace headdress.

It must be said that I have a deep affection for Marceau. I know few men as good as him. Not only does he drive well, he seems to try to anticipate my every wish. It was Admiral Bard\* who chose him from among the available chauffeurs at the Préfecture de Police. Then, in a more serious tone, I ask him the question:

- Explain to me, Marceau, how do you manage to be so good?

Marceau blushed.

- Me, right?" he replies, lowering his eyes. Oh, you mustn't say

that, sir. I'm not good, far from it. But here's the thing: I'm a bit bcte. I've often been reproached for that. I'm not very well educated. I don't have a head full of things. So I have time to think about what I can do to please others.

What an admirable response! What a blessed day! I stand for a moment without saying anything, while Werner murmurs these words:

-I thought I heard Alyosha Karamazov speak.

Suddenly, an idea strikes me.

- Do you know Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire?

- No.

- This is one of the oldest Romanesque churches in France. Its foundations date back to the XI<sup>e</sup> century. Let's visit it. It's not far from here.

After passing Saint Germain-des-Prés, the car turns onto a narrow road lined with seringas. This fragrance too

■ Prefect of Police.

reminds me of something. But what is it? I can't remember... Suddenly, I realize that Werner is wearing a German uniform. It bothers me. But what can I do? I should have realized earlier. Now it's too late to turn back.

Already, the basilica appears behind a screen of hawthorns. God, how beautiful it is in its robust simplicity! Its facade, the color of old ivory, resembles a gospel plaque. The car stops in front of the porch. We dismount and enter the nave. Werner is overwhelmed by the elegance of the vault. I spot a sacristan busy arranging candles in a side chapel. I walk over to him and say a few words in his ear.

- Yes," he replies, "the shrine is in the crypt beneath the high altar.

- Can you open the gate for me?

- We only open it on exceptional occasions...

- This is an exceptional day for me.

He looks at me and says:

- I'll get the key.

I take a few steps towards Werner.

- Dear friend, excuse me. I'd like to be alone for a few minutes.

- All right, then. I too would like to say a prayer.

I'm grateful to him for his half-hearted understanding.

The sacristan returns and opens the gate for me. While Werner prays in the nave, I enter the crypt. In the half-light, I make out a very old sarcophagus: that of Philip I<sup>er</sup>. Then an even older shrine containing relics of Saint Benedict. I kneel before it and ask the patron saint of Europe to give me the strength I need to accomplish my task. Then I sink into deep contemplation.

When I come up from the crypt, Werner is still kneeling on a prie-Dieu, his face buried in his hands. I gently place two fingers on his shoulder and say:

- I'm sorry, but it's getting early afternoon. We have to get back.

We get back in the car and head for the road to Moulins. I look at my watch: it's nearly 3 o'clock.

We drive through Cosne towards La Charité. As we leave town, the chestnut tree-lined road runs alongside my old depot. As we pass, I recognize the barracks where I was sorting blankets in October 1939. I look up at the trees: they are covered with new leaves, among which stand little white candles that look like flowers.

At the same moment, with the speed of lightning, I thought back to Marie Lagrave's prediction\*, which I had completely erased from my memory, and which I haven't thought of once since: "We'll need him... We'll come for him... France will have two capitals... I see him in a car, sitting next to someone in a foreign uniform."

Wide-eyed, I look at Werner, who doesn't understand why I'm staring at him like this. The prediction has come true - Marie Lagrave was right! She'd only got the year wrong. She had placed in 1940 what was only supposed to take place in 1941...

Tears well up in my eyes as I become aware of three things at once, and I don't know which upsets me most: a disaster, a bloom and a promise kept.

## CHAPTER VI

### ALONE AGAINST HITLER

(Berchtesgaden, May 11, 1941)

On Saturday May 3, 1941, at around 10 a.m., Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in Paris, asked me to drop in on him at Rue de Lille. He said he had an urgent message for me. As far as I could tell from the telephone, he sounded agitated. Since I had all the time in the world that day, I suggested I go to the embassy in the early evening.

— It's quite late," he replied. I absolutely must see you before 6pm.

I explained to him that I had a very busy day ahead of me, and that I'd be at the Hôtel Matignon all afternoon for a whole series of appointments, but that if he'd like to drop by my office, I'd be happy to see him for a few minutes between doors.

— I'm coming," he says. I'll be there in a moment.

A quarter of an hour later, the bailiff announced him. I had him brought in immediately.

— I've just received an urgent message from M. von Ribbentrop," he said. The Reich Foreign Minister has asked me to ask you whether the French government would be willing, in return for certain advantages, to allow some fifty German aircraft bound for Iraq to land in Syria. Given the range of these aircraft, they can't get from Greece to Baghdad in one go. They had to make a stopover during the flight to refuel. As Turkey is neutral and Palestine is in British hands, the only place they can land is in Syria.

My surprise was total. The question wasn't just unexpected: it was clearly outside the scope of our usual talks.

- As Secretary General of the Government," I told him, "I can't give you an immediate answer. I must first consult Admiral Darlan and the Marshal.

- Please do so as soon as possible," replied the ambassador. M.



von Ribbentrop would like to know the position of the French government this very evening.

This haste was new to me. Since I had taken up my post at the end of February, I had constantly sent notes to the German authorities, sometimes requesting the release of prisoners, sometimes asking for the armistice conditions to be relaxed, sometimes protesting against abusive requisitions. I had constantly come up against a wall of silence. Now, for the first time, the roles were reversed. The Reich was the plaintiff. And it was in a matter to which it seemed to attach great importance. One word from the ambassador had caught my attention. "With certain advantages", he had said. All this was still nebulous, and I had no point of reference to guide me. But I sensed at once that something was afoot that could have far-reaching consequences. No doubt it was best to proceed with caution. But we shouldn't let a chance, however small, to improve our situation slip through our fingers.

As soon as the ambassador left, I telephoned Admiral Darlan, to pass on the question that had just been put to me.

At first, the Admiral seemed as surprised as I was.

- Why on earth are the Germans asking us to let a few planes stop over in Syria," he replied, "and why are they offering us advantages in compensation, when they have every right to do so without asking our permission? Syria and Lebanon are controlled by German-Italian military commissions, which have the upper hand over our airfields and arms depots. If they were to requisition a field for a few days to allow their planes to refuel there, I really don't see how we could object!

- Perhaps they fear a reaction from our army in the Levant?

- I don't think so! Our troops in the Levant are three-quarters disarmed, and their weapons are stored in depots under strict Italian and German control. We can't lift a finger without them knowing about it!

It was difficult to talk to each other except in hushed tones, as we knew that the Germans had wired listening devices into the telephone lines between Paris and Vichy.

- Wouldn't it be best if I came to the *Hôtel du Parc* to discuss the matter with you and the Marshal?

The Admiral thought for a moment.

- No," he replied. Stay in Paris. I was planning to go there

tomorrow. I'm going to bring forward my departure by twenty-four hours. I'll arrive this evening. Tell the ambassador he'll have our answer by 10 tomorrow morning at the latest. By then, I'll have had time to talk it over with the Marshal and think about it during the night.

I immediately passed this reply on to the ambassador. Abetz seemed disappointed at having to wait until the following day. I pointed out to him that, given the lack of security offered by the telephone links - there had been recent leaks, the origin of which we still didn't know - it was materially impossible to act any faster.

\*

A few preliminary explanations will give the reader a better understanding of the situation.

In May 1941, America was not at war, and no one knew if it ever would be. Roosevelt's declarations even asserted the contrary. Hadn't the President of the United States made a solemn pledge under pressure from his public opinion "never to send American boys to fight across the seas?" No doubt he had replaced the draconian "cash and carry" clauses with the more flexible "lend and lease" system. But he seemed to want to confine himself to the role of supplier to the belligerents, while carefully keeping out of the conflict.

The USSR, too, was not yet at war. Although its relations with Germany were less cordial than they had been in the weeks following the signing of the German-Soviet Pact<sup>1</sup>, it was still supplying huge quantities of fuel and raw materials: wood, coal, manganese and so on. I was all the more aware of the extent of this cooperation as Mr. Molotov' - whom unforeseen circumstances had brought me to meet in Berlin, when I was working there as head of the diplomatic delegation of prisoners of war - had stressed its importance to me.

England, which had bravely overcome the terrible ordeal of the *Blitz*, was nonetheless in a precarious situation. As Churchill would later admit, ■ she was having all the trouble in the world keeping her head above water". The Battle of the Atlantic was intensifying. The tonnage of British ships sunk by German U-boats was increasing week by week. In March and April alone, it

had risen to 492,400 tons. By his own admission, these figures kept Churchill awake at night. In Cyrenaica, the Afrikakorps, which Rommel had just taken command of, had resumed the offensive after Graziani's retreat. It was closing in on Tobruk and giving General Wavel serious cause for concern. Germany was victorious on every battlefield. Although the end of the war was not yet in sight, it seemed improbable that it could be lost, as the campaigns in Poland, Norway, the West and the Balkans had barely dented its military potential. As for the territories her armies occupied in Europe, they were all pledges she could use as bargaining chips in the event of a negotiated peace.

And France? It was in a tragic situation. More than twelve hundred thousand young people were still trapped behind German barbed wire. Our armistice army, whose strength did not exceed seventy thousand men including the gendarmerie, was devoid of planes, tanks, ammunition and heavy artillery. Our fleet was blocked at Toulon and Alexandria. Supplying the population posed distressing problems. Our entire rail network had to be rebuilt, and no one could bring us any help.

Added to this were the additional difficulties created by the crisis of December 13, 1940. Following the ousting of Pierre Laval, all Franco-German negotiations broke down. The demarcation line had become impassable. German levies had increased in alarming proportions. In short, the country was on the verge of asphyxiation. Ensuring survival in such conditions was - like it or not - a difficult task.

The Admiral arrived at the Hotel *Bristol* at around 7 p.m. and asked me to come and see him immediately. Over the frugal dinner that followed, we discussed the problem at hand. Should we refuse the German request? Nothing could have been simpler. But this attitude risked serious consequences. It didn't take much imagination to foresee them. The fist of the German military administration would come down even harder on the country. In Syria, the Luftwaffe would override our veto, and we would have lost the advantages of a negotiated agreement.

But agreeing was only possible if there were substantial quid pro quos. We had to make the most of this favorable situation, not

only for the present, but also for the future. Up until now, we had been like unfortunate stricken victims, precipitated by defeat to the bottom of a dark abyss. We looked up desperately for some light, and saw only a black sky. Suddenly, in the narrow circle that limited our gaze, a thin silver crescent appeared. It was a ray of hope sent from Syria. The event I'd been waiting for for some time was about to take shape: our overseas territories were coming to the aid of metropolitan France. This was the lever we needed to pull ourselves out of our doldrums.

During March and April, the members of my cabinet, working in liaison with the other ministries, had drawn up a list of demands which we intended to present to the Germans as soon as the right circumstances arose. Its headings, arranged in order of urgency, ranged from the most minute issues to the most far-reaching. Pulling the file from my briefcase, the Admiral and I examined the demands that could be made on our acceptance. After two hours of discussion, our plan was established. To tell the truth, it was excessive, and we knew it. But we were too poor to be modest.

The demands we made in return for the passage through Syria of fifty aircraft bound for Iraq were political, economic and military.

They were as follows:

*1°) The return to their homes of all veterans of the 1914-1918 war and fathers of four children, including reserve officers (approximately 300,000 men),*

*2°) A significant easing of the demarcation line, to allow the two halves of France to communicate with each other again;*

*3°) A daily reduction of 100 million francs in the occupation indemnity (which the armistice agreement had set at 400 million per day);*

*4°) A full complement of cadres, manpower and armaments for our metropolitan army and overseas forces, by destocking weapons placed under the control of the armistice commissions;*

*5°) Adjustments to the status of the two departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, which an arbitrary measure resulting from the situation at the front in May-June 1940*

*had attached to the German administration in Brussels, and their reintegration into the French administration;*

*6°) The guarantee that the Levant States would remain under French mandate and would not be contested when the future peace treaty was drawn up;*

*7°) A similar general guarantee of French sovereignty over the whole of our empire (this requirement was intended to protect us against the well-known ambitions of Italy and those - less well known - of Spain, as well as against any bargaining that might take place at our expense between Germany and the United Kingdom).*

The passage of aircraft to Iraq was subject to the following restrictions:

*1°) They would land at a single airfield, designated by us (in this case, Aleppo);*

*2°) Pilots and flight crews would be in civilian clothes and would be confined to the airfield for the duration of the operation;*

*3°) The aircraft would be marked in Iraqi rather than German colors.*

With these conditions in mind, I went to the German embassy the next morning.

On hearing this, Abetz frowned.

- Well," he tells me, "you're not going to mince your words! You're presenting us with a list of formidable claims in exchange for the simple right to stopover a few unfortunate aircraft...

- I won't deny it," I replied. "At first sight, it may seem exorbitant. But if you think about it, you'll see that all our demands are justified. They're not based on air transit, which is of little importance in itself - I readily agree - but on the risks it exposes us to, which are considerable. Tomorrow, General Wavell's troops could attack Syria. Our army in the Levant has nothing to defend itself with. What's more, the British fleet could retaliate by bombing Bizerte, Algiers, Casablanca or Dakar. We are in no position to prevent this. But we have to be able to explain to the public why we have exposed ourselves to this danger. After all, we didn't raise the issue in the first place. If Mr

von Ribbentrop thinks our demands are too high, we'll just have to leave it at that...

I reached for the file.

Abetz stopped me. He looked puzzled.

- Let's not be too hasty," he says. For my part, I don't see any problem with you presenting this book of complaints. But I'm afraid Mr von Ribbentrop will find them excessive. By being so demanding, you will lead him to think that the Reich can do without Vichy's authorization. All that's needed is for the armistice commission in Wiesbaden to notify General Dentz of the passage of the planes.

- No doubt," I retorted. But then you run a risk that you're wrong to underestimate.

- Which one?

- If General Dentz is not informed beforehand that the Marshal agrees to the passage of the planes, and if he does not receive instructions to this effect from the Ministry of Defense and the Admiralty, he risks opening fire on them, as he will consider their arrival as a denunciation of the armistice. If he takes this attitude, the movement will spread to all our African possessions. The British will take advantage of the situation. Then the Cyrenaica front will be swept away. Rommel will just have to pack up, and you'll have lost the Mediterranean. Is that what you want?

It was an aspect of the problem he hadn't considered. I was deliberately painting things in a very dark light, hoping to impress the German high command. It was, after all, just a series of hypotheses. But who could guarantee that they wouldn't come true?

- If the British come to Africa, you can be sure we'll drive them out," Abetz replied. But you can also be sure that we won't give you back territories that German and Italian soldiers have won back with their blood. On that day, you will have lost everything: the metropolis *and* the empire.

- Unless you've lost the war in the meantime...

Abetz retched. With a wave of my hand, I cut short his protests and continued:

- By the way, you seem to forget that the British are *already* in Africa. They occupy Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Abyssinia and South Africa... But we're not here to play *Kriegspiel*. We have a particular problem to deal with. Until further notice, the empire and the metropolis are one and the same. To expose them on one

point is to expose them on all. That's why we can only agree to this operation in return for compensation that offsets the risks.

- That's fine. I'll pass on your requests to M von Ribbentrop," replied the ambassador. But I'd be very surprised if he agreed.

1. At the time, General Dentz was France's High Commissioner to the Levant States (Syria-Lebanon).

I reported our conversation to the Admiral. There was nothing to do but wait.

Around 4 p.m., Abetz called me on the phone again. When he received me at the embassy, he tried to put on an impenetrable mask, but I knew him too well not to notice that deep down he was satisfied.

- Contrary to my apprehensions, Mr. von Ribbentrop has agreed to begin talks on the basis of your requests," he tells me. He has asked me to draw up a draft agreement with you. But he has three conditions: 1) That we move quickly, as he needs to be fixed tomorrow at the latest; 2) That the agreement be signed by the head of government, in person; 3) That the Admiral give an undertaking, on his honor, that Syria - or any other part of your overseas territories - will defend themselves if they are the object of British aggression.

I immediately relayed this message to the Admiral, who was still at the Hotel *Bristol*. He called Vichy on the telephone. After a few minutes of discussion, I obtained the Marshal's agreement, and an appointment was made with the German ambassador for 10 a.m. the following morning.

The meeting between the Admiral, Ambassador Abetz and myself was relatively brief, because with the exception of one - to which I'll return in a moment - Germany accepted in principle all our conditions: the return of prisoners who were veterans and fathers of four children, the easing of the demarcation line, a reduction in occupation costs, the destocking of weapons, a modification of the regulations governing our northern departments, the maintenance of French authority over the Levant states and the renunciation of all present or future claims to these territories by the Axis powers.

- We've also asked for this guarantee to be extended to our entire empire," remarked the Admiral.

- I can't promise you that," replied Abetz, "because this matter is beyond my competence. It's even beyond Mr. von Ribbentrop's

competence. Only the Führer can decide it, because it involves the general policy of the Reich and its conduct towards Italy. But once agreement has been reached on all the other questions, I have every reason to believe that the Chancellor will invite you to visit him in Berchtesgaden, to discuss them with him.

A kind of "gentlemen's agreement" of a few lines - later to be known as the "May 5th agreement" - was initialled by the Admiral, who instructed me to finalize its implementation. I agreed that Ambassador Scapini would work with General Reinecke on the release of prisoners, and that Mr. Bouthillier, Minister of Finance, and Mr. Bréart de Boisanger, Governor of the Banque de France, would work with Mr. Hemmen\* on the release of prisoners. General Huntziger, Minister of Defense, with the Wiesbaden Armistice Commission, regarding the military clauses (arms destocking and replenishment of our North African forces), reserving the right to coordinate these various negotiations. I added, at the last minute, an additional demand: the release of General Juin, who was interned in Saxony, in the fortress of Kœnigstein.

- Now that we've agreed on the broad lines," says Abetz, "I'll telephone Berchtesgaden to inform Mr. von Ribbentrop and ask the Führer when he can see you. But don't be surprised if you don't get an answer for two or three days. In the meantime, I trust that you will send the necessary instructions to General Dentz, so that he will let the planes through as agreed. They are due to take off from Greece this very evening.

Back at the Hôtel Matignon, Admiral Darlan wrote instructions to this effect to Admiral Gouton, commander of the Beirut naval base, asking him to pass them on to General Dentz. Here is the text:

*1°) General talks are underway between the French and German governments.*

*2°) It is of the utmost importance to their success that if German aircraft land on land in the Mandate territories, you make it easy for them to get back on course.*

*3°) Acknowledge receipt through marine intermediary.*

He left me a copy of this message, so that I could show it to



Abetz. The Admiral intended to leave immediately for Vichy, as he wanted to send his instructions to Beirut in secret code, which was impossible from the occupied zone.

■ Head of the economic section of the Wiesbaden Armistice Commission.

Just as he was about to get into the car, I had a scruple. Taking him aside on the sidewalk of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, I said:

- Wouldn't it be wiser to postpone sending out this cable until all the implementation procedures have been at least partially implemented? I fear that difficulties may arise at the last minute...

- Which ones?

- Right now, the Germans are acting under duress. In a few days' time, however, this will no longer be the case. I fear that junior German officials, in their zeal to do the right thing, will seek to undermine the quid pro quos we have been granted. Aircraft transit authorization is the only weapon we have. Once the planes have passed through, we'll have nothing left in our hands if, by any chance, the Germans go back on their promises.

The Admiral thought for a moment. Then he said:

- You're too Cartesian! If we surround ourselves with so many precautions, we'll ruin everything. According to my information, the Iraqi revolt will be nothing but a flash in the pan. In eight or ten days, it will be out of the news. By then, the Germans will have lost interest and will regret the concessions they've made. No. The planes have to get through this very night. There's no other way to force them to respect our agreement.

With that, the Admiral headed for Vichy, and I for the Rue de Lille, to inform Abetz that the necessary instructions would be sent to General Dentz, and that Luftwaffe planes could take off from their bases in Greece this evening.

The next morning, General Dentz replied laconically:

- *Received and understood.*

Two days passed, and conversations began on how to implement the May 5 agreement (relaxation of the demarcation line, return of prisoners, reduction of occupation costs). On May 8, Abetz informed me that the Führer would receive the Admiral and me in Berchtesgaden on May 11.



The special train taking Admiral Darlan, Commissar General

de La Monneraye\*, Commandant Fontaine\*, Ambassador Abetz, Councillor Schleier and me to Germany crossed the Franco-German border at dawn on Saturday May 10th. A year earlier, at exactly the same time, German armies were rushing westwards through Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. What an avalanche of events had befallen us since then! And yet, the earth was less scarred than the men. Apart from a few destroyed bridges, already in the process of being rebuilt, and several gutted casemates that had once formed part of the Maginot line, there was no trace of the battle.

Hornbeams and beeches were bursting into bud, fruit trees were in bloom and fields were covered in promising fleece.

At 5 p.m., our train pulled into Munich, where we were greeted by Messrs Schwartzmann, in charge of French affairs in Mr von Ribbentrop's office, and Strack, from the protocol department. The late afternoon was spent visiting the Feldherrnhalle, in front of which the 1923 shoot-out had taken place, and the ■ Maison Brune ■ where the banners of the Baltic and Ruhr Corps Francs were bundled together. A whole chapter of contemporary German history was unfolding before my eyes.

The next morning, at 9 o'clock, a long line of Mercedes cars took us to Salzburg, where we stopped for a few moments at the *Osterreichischer Hof* before continuing on, not to the Berghof as we had expected, but to Fuschl, where we found the small castle of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. His residence was an 18th-century hunting lodge built on the edge of a lake. I was assured that the site was delightful. But that day, it was difficult to judge, as an opaque fog obscured the mountain tops. Only their base showed through a veil of rain.

After the usual introductions, Ribbentrop asked the Admiral and Abetz to move up to the second floor, where his office was located, while La Monneraye, Fontaine and I remained in the ground-floor salon, in the company of a small group of German diplomats.

Both collaborated with Admiral Darlan.

After half an hour, the Admiral, M. von Ribbentrop and Abetz reappeared. They were all smiling. We went back down to Salzburg for lunch, while Ribbentrop went straight to the Berghof, where we were to meet him in the early afternoon.

At the *Osterreichischer Hof*, the Admiral took advantage of a moment's respite to brief me on his meeting with Ribbentrop.

- This first contact was rather good, he tells me. It went off without a hitch, and in a polite atmosphere. But I wonder why the Minister asked us to come all the way to his house. He had nothing in particular to say to me. We confined ourselves to banalities. I got the impression he was trying to save time. These people are strange. I must admit I don't understand them.

But how would we be received by the master of the III<sup>e</sup> Reich, whose power was at its height, and whose troops occupied three-quarters of Europe? That was another matter, and the Admiral was well aware of it. Although he always displayed an imperturbable phlegm, I could sense how tense he was, from the jerky gesture with which he got tangled up in his decorations as he put his coat back on, as we got into the car to drive to the Führer's house this time.

The culminating moment of our trip had arrived.

The road leading from Salzburg to Berchtesgaden climbed steadily, and the higher it went, the wider the valley seemed to become. The mist, very thick in the morning, was beginning to dissipate and, although the sky remained grey, we could now make out the tops of the mountains. Long wisps of mist still clung to the sides of the rocks. The sheer scale of the scenery, the presence of countless waterfalls whose muffled roar could be heard through the fog, the jagged clouds drifting in the wind, all contributed to the highly romantic character of the landscape. Here and there, the clouds parted, revealing a forest of fir trees, moss-covered stones and a clearing through which a herd of deer was fleeing.

The road climbed and climbed. At a bend in the road, we passed a line of black cars speeding down towards Salzburg. The road was so narrow that our driver had to swerve to avoid them. We had just enough time to recognize Marshal Goering, General Bodenschatz\* and a few Luftwaffe staff officers as they passed. Five hundred meters further on, a second column of cars passed us at full speed. Mr. Strack, who was sitting next to me, asked if I'd seen Himmler in the lead car. He was followed by a number of

SS generals. The Berghof was definitely in an uproar, and I wondered what could be the cause, as I didn't think such a commotion could be attributed to our arrival.

Our line of cars continued to climb. Ten minutes later, it passed a gate to the right and left of which were two armed sentries, then a sort of blockhouse, guarded by other sentries belonging to the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler. Finally, we emerged onto a gravel-covered median. The cars screeched to a halt at the bottom of a staircase leading up to the Berghof. We had arrived.

Waiting for us at the top of the steps were Mr. von Bibbentrop, Ambassador Abetz, Mr. Paul Schmidt, the Führer's interpreter, Ambassador Hewel, the Foreign Minister's permanent delegate to the Chancellor, Major Engel, Hitler's aide-de-camp, and a number of orderly officers. After a quick greeting, we were ushered into the house. There, Admiral Darlan, M. von Ribbentrop, Abetz and interpreter Schmidt made their way to the Führer's reception room, while the rest of the delegation was directed to a small lounge opening onto a terrace. It all happened so quickly that I didn't even notice. No sooner had we entered the room than I heard someone pull a lock behind us. A rush of anger went through my head. As I expressed my surprise at this to an orderly, he explained that this was nothing out of the ordinary and that I shouldn't take it personally. The rules forbade anyone to move around the house during the Führer's audiences. I was about to reply that it would have been enough to warn us, and that there was no need to lock the door to enforce this rule, when the officer added:

- If the Führer found the meeting satisfactory, the whole delegation

■ Chief of Staff to Field Marshal Goering.

You'll be invited to join him for a cup of tea. Otherwise, you'll be on your way back to Munich.

Feeling in no mood to show much thoughtfulness to people who were clearly showing us so little, I turned my back on the officers in the parlour and stepped out onto the terrace to take in the scenery. The valley stretching out at my feet seemed to have widened again since earlier. Clouds as bluish as incense smoke rose slowly to the sky. Through their indentations, I could see a thin silver thread winding its way along the valley floor. It was

the Salzach. The scenery was both grandiose and wild. It invincibly evoked Goethe's famous line that "peace reigns on all peaks".

But if this peace reigned on the summits, it hardly reigned in this house and even less in me. The longer the Hitler-Darlan conversation went on, the more worried I became. Not because I didn't think Darlan was capable of getting himself out of trouble on his own, but because this way of proceeding nullified the scenario we had agreed on before leaving Paris. It had been agreed - since I spoke fluent German - that after the usual introductions, he would ask the Chancellor to continue the conversation with me. He felt that, as vice-president of the Council, his every word was irrevocably binding on the government, and wanted to spare himself the possibility of retreating if it turned out that one of his sentences had gone beyond his thoughts. Added to this very legitimate precaution was - I believe - the desire, if things went badly, not to find himself alone face to face with Hitler, after the memorable experience he had had at Beauvais. So he must have been very uneasy at the moment, especially as, thinking things would turn out differently, he had entrusted me with all the maps and documents likely to support his argument. These were in my briefcase. I hadn't had time to give them to him before I was separated from him. And since he didn't know how the pieces were arranged, it would be pointless to make him carry them now.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly 5pm. More than an hour had passed since our arrival at the Berghof. Weary of moping on the terrace where a sort of drizzle was falling, I returned to the small salon, where I found Commissar General de La Monneraye and Commandant Fontaine toasting cigarettes in silence, while Mr. Schleier and Ambassador Hewel were engaged in a lively conversation about the best way to keep succulents in the overheated apartments. I sat down beside them, resigned to listening to this insipid dialogue, when the door to the lounge opened. An SS lieutenant announced that the Führer was inviting everyone to tea. I concluded that the conversation had been favorable, and suddenly felt a great weight lifted off my shoulders.

Grabbing my briefcase, I made my way along a wide gallery

closed at one end by a dark velvet curtain. Commissaire de La Monneraye and Commandant Fontaine followed me, escorted by half a dozen German officers. A guard pushed aside the curtain to let us through, and, as if on a stage, I saw the Führer standing in the middle of his huge workroom. Admiral Darlan, M. von Ribbentrop, Ambassador Abetz and interpreter Schmidt stood in a semi-circle around him. But Hitler's presence alone reduced them to insignificance. I had the impression that if a gust of wind blew across the room, only he would remain. There was something disconcerting about standing before a being who was both unreal and more real than the others. Very upright, motionless in his feldgrau tunic and black pants, with no decoration other than the Iron Cross of the First Class, his hands clasped, his gaze absent, he seemed a world away from his interlocutors. The overriding feeling about him was an indefinable mixture of power and solitude. He was "a man apart", in the strongest sense of the word.

Ambassador Abetz introduced me to the Chancellor. I noticed that he was not as tall as he had appeared from the rostrum, and that his hair was a lighter chestnut than I had expected. As for his eyes - two eyes so fascinating that I saw only them at first - they were a clear, transparent blue, lightly streaked with gray, black and yellow. They seemed stareless and as if deprived of life. But very quickly, one was led to revise this judgment. What gave the impression of emptiness was their fixity. It was as if his eyelids, instead of scanning the world, were turned inwards, following a spectacle unfolding deep inside. Unlike most people, whose gaze falls on you - or even pierces you - the Chancellor's seemed to suck you in and slowly draw you into his inner world. You gradually felt a kind of mental numbness, which you could only escape by an effort of will.

Hitler shook hands with me, Fontaine and La Monneraye, while Abetz said a few words in German about each of us. As he had just won another series of victories in Greece, I expected to find him satisfied and beaming. Contrary to my expectations, his face was marked by deep sadness. I remembered seeing him like this in a photograph. But where? I quickly consulted my memory and was able to identify my recollection. It was a snapshot taken from the chancellery balcony on July 1<sup>er</sup> 1934, the day after Rohm's execution. Why did it have the same tragic expression

today?

The Admiral spoke up and the Chancellor's face immediately came to life. I'd thought he was frozen. Instead, it was the most mobile, expressive face I'd ever seen. It was like a cinema screen, on which the most fleeting shades of his thoughts were painted. It resembled the landscape we'd just crossed, where the clouds overlapped, chased by the wind.

- I was very impressed by the Wehrmacht's recent offensive in the Balkans," said the Admiral. I'm not talking about the bravery of the German soldier, which is well known, but about the perfection with which the general staff operates. These motorized divisions, hurtling towards their objectives and arriving on time, according to schedule, is truly impressive.

Mr. Schmidt translated the Admiral's words as he went along. Hearing the qualities of I'O.K.W., the Führer smiled, then pouted scornfully.

- Does he speak well of the Wehrmacht?" he asked, addressing the interpreter rather than the Admiral. It's obvious he doesn't command it! I know its imperfections better than he does. Tell him that the German army would have to make a lot more progress to be, I don't say perfect, but at least up to the tasks I'm preparing for it.

Mr. Schmidt translated this reply. The Admiral, who had watched Hitler's disgruntled expression with surprise, refrained from insisting.

- What I'm saying here," he remarked cautiously, "is only the opinion of a spectator.

Schmidt then made a translation error that is all the more inexplicable given his admirable knowledge of our language. Confusing *Zuschauer* with *Sachverständiger*, he repeated to Hitler:

- The Admiral says it's the opinion of an expert...

As a result, Hitler's face darkened. Expert opinion? Did the Admiral intend to teach him a lesson? Was he, too, one of those military men who believe their rank insignia confers universal competence? Did he, like others, take him for an Austrian corporal?

As if clouds had rushed in from every corner of the horizon, a veritable gust passed over his features. His eyebrows furrowed, his gaze hardened. Was the scene at Beauvais about to be

repeated?

Feeling his anger rising, I was wondering whether I should intervene to clear up the misunderstanding, when the announcement came that tea was served. The Führer's face suddenly relaxed. To my great relief, the storm had passed, and it was with a kind, but again slightly sad smile that the master of the III<sup>e</sup> Reich invited us to follow him.

\*

We made our way to the back of the room, which was a few steps higher than the rest of the room, and stood in a semicircle in front of a fireplace, where three tree trunks were burning in a pyramid shape, their flames shooting two meters into the air. A real fire! Hitler took his place in the middle of the sofa, with Admiral Darlan and Abetz on his right, myself and M. von Ribbentrop on his left.

The mantel had monumental dimensions. Its base was decorated with a bronze bas-relief depicting a young man standing, brandishing a standard. His naked torso appeared and disappeared through the swirling flames. As soon as the Chancellor caught sight of the fire, he literally froze in front of it like a hound in front of a piece of game, and stood for a long moment, speechless and motionless, watching the logs burn away. I had the impression at that moment that nothing else existed for him, and that he had completely forgotten we were there.

As the silence dragged on, the Admiral coughed and felt he had to say a few words to remind us of our presence.

- This show," he remarked, turning to Hitler, "surpasses all plays for my taste...

The Chancellor smiled, but said nothing. Silence reigned again, broken only by the flickering of the flames.

Just then, five or six young men entered the room, carrying tea and cakes on trays. They were members of the Leibstandarte, specially entrusted with the interior service of the house. They were dressed in black pants with white piping and white spencers embroidered with silver eagles. Despite their very young age - eighteen to twenty-two at most - most were already wearing military decorations.



Suddenly, the Chancellor awoke from his torpor and launched into a long monologue, to whom it was unclear who he was addressing.

- England, always England..." he said in a dull voice, "in every country in the world, at every turning point in history, it's there, lying in ambush on its island, lying in wait for peoples to seize their wealth and increase its booty...". Have you noticed that, apart from coal, the English have never produced anything from their own country, and have imported everything from abroad: wool, cotton, copper, oil, gold? Has it occurred to you that all London's treasures were brought here by ship? This city is but the sum total of the millions of cargoes dumped, century after century, on the banks of the Thames. A pirate civilization! And how we facilitate their task! Not just by our baser selves - interest and greed - but even more so, by our nobler, higher selves: our ideals! Every time a great idea has arisen on the continent, England has risen up against it to bring it down. Look at our wars of religion and our revolutions! England has always stirred them up to set us against each other. She will not give free rein to her internal dissensions! Not because she's devoid of passions, but because she knows how damaging it would be to her interests. And the rest of us, poor fools, who refuse to understand England's true game, the more we obey our ideals, the more we allow ourselves to be seduced by her siren songs...

As I wasn't quite sure what he was getting at, I stopped listening to him to observe him more closely. The glow of the flames was reflected on his face, emphasizing the shape of his forehead and the bulge of his eyebrows. I noticed how fleshy his nose was and how heavy his nostrils were. The lower part of his face was beginning to creak. Where did this impression of power come from? His features, shoulders and gestures were limp. His pale, waxy complexion was that of a man suffering from insomnia, and there was something sensual about the shape of his lips that contradicted what we knew of the austerity of his life. His hands, on the other hand, were superb. Fine and expressive, they seemed to quiver with a life of their own. From time to time, they embraced each other with a movement that went from palm to fingertips, as if to expel an excess of fluid. I realized then that the strength emanating from him was not muscular - although he was capable of withstanding physical tests that would have

exhausted more robust men - but psychic and nervous. He appeared to me as a formidable accumulator of energy, a dynamo generating a high-voltage current that sometimes burst forth from him in sudden, lightning-fast bursts.

All this created a danger zone around him that people were reluctant to cross, increasing his isolation. Some called him a superman, others a demon. In truth, these words, applied to him, made no sense. In some ways, he was so ordinary that you wouldn't have known him from the others if you'd met him in the street. But at the top of a podium, framed by the spotlight and carried by a hurricane of cheers, he became an inspired being, out of all proportion to the rest of his fellows. And all this he did with an absence of ostentation that underlined the strangeness of his nature. He offered no trace of that split personality so often seen in actors and politicians. He didn't watch himself perform, he didn't listen to himself speak, but identified totally with what he was saying or doing. The crowd instinctively sensed this, and so enthusiastically supported him. When he was in the grip of his inspiration and "the current was flowing", he became irresistible. He was said to be fanatical. But how could he not have been? It was part of his nature. It was like blaming a volcano for spitting fire. Completely unaware of what made him different from the others, he gave the impression of being possessed by a force acting through him for ends that escaped him, and which, when it reached too great a degree of intensity, translated into an expression of overwhelm.

- It was only natural," he continued in a harsher tone, "that England should act in this way. Every European killed on the continent was one more Englishman she could export to her empire! Britain would never have been able to take over such a large part of the planet, if we hadn't constantly slit each other's throats. What her leaders called the "balance of power" was merely a means of maintaining our rivalries. To achieve this, it went so far as to mask its selfish appetites behind humanitarian goals. Today, it claims to be fighting for the liberation of small peoples: Greece, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania. In reality, it couldn't care less. In 1938, on the eve of the Munich Conference, did Chamberlain not declare that Great Britain would not take up arms to defend "a small country which most Englishmen could not even locate on the map"? She only sided with them to get in

my way. And what about today? Her only war aim, to hear her tell it, is the restoration of these states to their former rights. It brandishes the great word of freedom, because it knows it will always thrill the peoples of the continent. But how will it do this? If my troops were to withdraw, these countries would fall under the Kremlin's control overnight. Is this what she calls freedom?

The Führer was silent again. The interpreter took advantage of the intervals of silence to succinctly translate the gist of his words.

- No, no!" cried Hitler, his voice getting hoarser and hoarser as it swelled. I will not allow them to continue playing this game. I will not allow them to go back to suffocating the German people. I will destroy their power, sink their ships, pulverize their armies. The first time, at Dunkirk, I went easy on them. They didn't understand. Now it's over. I'll drive them off the continent, ten times, twenty times if need be, until they finally understand that their hegemony is over. I'll beat them ten to one, until they finally collapse. No compromise will ever be possible between us and them. From now on, it will be all-out war. God knows, I've reached out to them! They've rejected it every time. Too bad for them! It's a pity in a way, because the British Empire was a great thing whose disappearance will compromise the balance of the world. I didn't mean it any harm. But since they've chosen war, well, they'll have it...

One only had to hear the violence with which Hitler uttered these last words to guess how much amorous spite lay behind this explosion of rage.

When the interpreter had finished translating, Hitler, suddenly reassured, turned to the Admiral.

- Would you be willing to resume our conversation?" he asked.

- Gladly," replied Darlan, "but I'd like you to continue it with Mr. Benoist-Méchin. In addition to being fully conversant with the issues at stake, he will be able to speak directly in German, which will eliminate the need for an interpreter and save us a great deal of time.

After nodding in agreement, Hitler turned to me and looked at me quizzically. Then he stood up and we moved as a group to the other end of the room.

As I passed, I glanced at the Führer's workroom. Despite its size and the value of the works of art that adorned it, it retained an almost rustic character with its cream-painted walls, wooden coffered platbnd and light oak panels. On one side, admirable Italian Renaissance paintings, including a Titian, a gift from Mussolini; on the other, a superb 18TH-CENTURY tapestry depicting a battle scene, specially woven for the Schönbrunn Palace. A grand piano, a large globe, an antique bust and leather-covered sofas completed the décor.

On the opposite side of the room from the fireplace in front of which Hitler had just delivered his monologue was a huge bay window, through which one could see the Salzach valley and the amphitheatre of mountains that bordered it to the south. A ray of sunlight was now playing with the clouds, building a tenuous rainbow from one to the next.

In front of the bay was an almost six-meter-long table - another gift from Mussolini - whose top was made of a single slab of porphyry. Here I unfolded the maps I'd brought with me. Hitler, who had put on a large pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, stood to my right. The Admiral, M. von Ribbentrop, Ambassador Abetz and Paul Schmidt gathered some distance behind us. They were joined by a slim, distinguished man I hadn't noticed before. It was Werner Otto von Hentig, who had played a mysterious role in Afghanistan during the First World War and had since become the Onent specialist at Wilhelmstrasse.

Up until then, I'd seen a visionary, vaticinatory Hitler, dreaming of the annihilation of Albion. Suddenly, I found myself before an entirely different character: a realist with a lucid mind, a strategist preparing his operations with meticulous attention to detail. The transformation was complete.

- How many airfields are there in Syria?" he began by asking me.

For a few seconds, I hesitated to answer him, aware of the military nature of this information. But then I realized that my reflex was absurd, that I wouldn't be telling him anything he didn't already know, or that he couldn't find out from a simple phone call to the armistice commission in Wiesbaden.

- Four or five," I replied.

- Ah! I thought there were more of them.

- They used to be. But most of them have been rendered

unusable since the armistice of June 1940.

- On whose orders?
- German-Italian control commissions.
- And how do you make an airfield unusable?
- It's very simple: we plow it.
- That's right. Is this how it was done?
- Yes.
- Everywhere?
- No. These airfields (I pointed to Aleppo, Rayak and Deir ez-Zor) are intact. But Deir ez-Zor has no repair shop. What's more, it's the furthest from the coast.

Hitler thought for a moment.

- Where are there petrol depots?
  - Certainly in Aleppo," I replied. Elsewhere, I don't know.
  - How much do we have in stock?
- I quoted the figures. They were very low. Hitler grimaced.
- Are they under the supervision of our control commissions?

- Yes.
- Couldn't they be recompleted?
- It's not easy...
- By bringing gasoline from Mosul?

- You can't count on it. Since the armistice, the British have blocked all oil imports into Syria and Lebanon. They have diverted all Iraqi production to Haifa. What's more, the oil from Kirkuk is crude. It would have to be refined on site. However, there is only one small refinery in Tripoli. It is barely sufficient for local consumption. Usually, oil from the Levant was refined in France.

- There?" he asked, pointing his index finger at the Etang de Berre.

I looked at him in amazement.

- Yes," I replied.

Silence again.

- What about by road? Since the pipeline is cut off, couldn't we get some by tanker?

- The journey would be very long. Besides, there are hardly any cross-roads in this part of Syria.

- Few roads?

- No. Apart from the coastal road, there are only tracks, and slowly, I followed the map with my finger along the various trails

that ran from the coast inland.

- Is that all?

- Yes, they are both rare and difficult for heavy vehicles to negotiate. They run the risk of getting silted up.

- And by sea?

- By sea, it's completely impossible. Access to the Syrian coast is controlled by Cyprus. Part of the British fleet is anchored at Famagusta. It blocks access to the north via Alexandrette, and to the south via Haifa. Turkish territorial waters would have to be used. But even then, the ships would be sunk before they arrived. Remember the *Valmark* incident in Norwegian waters...

The Führer frowned and thought for a long moment.

- This Iraq affair could have interesting ramifications," he said, shaking his head. But it broke out too soon, and we took it on a bit lightly. I don't have much confidence in its success, unless we can... Do you have any recent information on the evolution of the situation?" he asked, turning sharply to Ribbentrop.

The Reich Foreign Minister then explained why he had found it useful to respond favorably to Rachid Ali's appeal\*. The Reich could not remain deaf to the demands of the "Golden Square" nationalist officers who had seized power in Baghdad. They had ousted the regent Abdul-Illah, a creature of England, and appointed Rashid Ali Prime Minister; the friendship of the new Iraqi government would bring precious advantages to the Reich. The opening it would gain on the Persian Gulf would enable it to reach out to its Japanese ally.

- But we have to hurry," he added. The latest news is that the insurgency is in full retreat. According to our sources, a British motorized column is marching towards Baghdad. Planes from Basra have bombed Habaniyé. It is important to act quickly, if the promised relief is to arrive on time...

- Do the Iraqis have any weapons?" asked Hitler, turning back to me.

- I don't know.

- How do we get it to them?

I read him the passage from the May 5 agreement on the destocking of weapons placed in Beirut under the control of German-Italian commissions. It stipulated that one third of the weapons belonging to our army in the Levant, but which we no longer had at our disposal, would be handed over to the Iraqi

insurgents, and the other two thirds to the French high command.

- But in practice," I declared, "this method of distribution is not satisfactory. By allowing German planes to call at Aleppo, we have exposed Syria to British attacks. Our officers in the Levant are worried about seeing their reserves melt away at a time when the danger is increasing. We should proceed differently, classifying weapons by category and reserving heavy equipment for ourselves, as the Iraqis are unfamiliar with its use. What's the point of supporting Baghdad if you're going to lose Damascus?

■ Prime Minister of Iraq.

- Of course, of course," replied the Führer with a gesture of impatience. But your officers can rest assured. The danger they fear is illusory. The British will not attack.

- May I ask on what Your Excellency bases his conviction?

- At the moment, the British have too many problems on their hands to go looking for new ones. Rommel has just resumed the offensive in Cyrenaica. There's a symptomatic ferment in Egypt, and a growing effervescence in Palestine. The population is only waiting for our arrival to rise up in our favor. Our agents assure us that anti-English sentiment is very strong among Egyptian units stationed west of Cairo, towards Marsa-Matrouk. Our monitoring services have intercepted calls for help from General Wavel. He doesn't know where to turn. The British aren't crazy. If they attacked Syria, the French troops would defend themselves, I suppose?

- The armistice clauses oblige them to do so.

- So the English know. They won't mess with it.

- I apologize, Excellency, for not sharing your optimism.

- Why?

- Firstly, because the British have long coveted Syria. They have never been consoled by our installation in Damascus. Remember Lawrence's indignant outbursts at the Paris Conference.

- Rest assured! There won't be a second Lawrence. I read his book before the war. He was a man as England today no longer produces.

- England produced Churchill...

- He's an outdated figure. He's not of our time. Whether he

likes it or not, he will be the gravedigger of the empire.

- There are other reasons too. Whenever the British general staff thinks you're going to attack a particular territory, they always try to occupy it before you do. Two examples are Norway and Greece. General Wavel must be worried at the moment that you're trying to force your way through Turkey, to march on Suez and take the canal. It would therefore be in his interest to occupy Syria first, to bring himself to the edge of the Turkish frontier. This would widen the glacis defending the northeastern approaches to Suez, and put greater pressure on the government in Ankara.

- I don't believe it. Wavel can't afford it. He's desperate...

- For the moment, perhaps. But consider that he has behind him the Indies, Australia and New Zealand, those immense reservoirs of men. It's only a matter of time before we get them up and running.

- And tonnage.

- Yes.

- Even so, I don't believe it.

- For my part, Excellency, I remain convinced...

Given what I'd been told about his anger at the slightest contradiction, I wondered how he'd react to my refusal to share his point of view. To my surprise, he didn't mind. Perhaps it was because I wasn't German...

- Finally," he asked me suddenly, in a peremptory tone, "can we or can we not send arms and reinforcements to Syria?

- By air, it's impossible. By sea, it's out of the question.

- And on the floor?

- This would be possible, but only through Turkey. But the Turkish government has no desire to abandon its neutrality.

- I know it, I know it!

The Führer's face took on a fierce expression.

- The Turks! They keep me on my toes, with their sacrosanct neutrality! But all this will only last for a while. They'll give in eventually. For now, I'll just have to wait and see. But, come to think of it," he added, turning to Ribbentrop, "don't we have certain means of coercion at our disposal?

- Certainly, my Führer!" replied Ribbentrop.

- We'll have to discuss the matter with Papen<sup>1</sup> and Clodius , declared Hitler, as his clenched right fist repeatedly made the



gesture of crushing something in the palm of his left hand. Then, bending over the card again:

- What if we occupied Crete?" he asked, as if the idea had suddenly occurred to him.

- It wouldn't make much difference to the situation. The route from Candia to Beirut is obviously shorter than that from Piraeus to the Syrian coast. But even so, the sea convoys won't get through. The distance there and back exceeds the range of fighter planes and, without air protection, the ships will be sunk.

- You mean the real keys to the Mediterranean are here and here?" said Hitler, pointing to Malta and Cyprus on the map.

- Napoleon also added Zante and Corfu. But that was back in the days of sailing ships...

The Führer straightened up, removed his glasses and took a long look at the horizon, as if scanning the future. Twilight filled the valley floor. The wind had blown away the last of the clouds. In the distance, the brilliant mountain peaks stood out against a transparent sky.

- That's good," says Hitler simply. I'll think about these questions.

He ran a hand over his forehead and moved away from the table. From the sound of his voice and his suddenly distant expression, I knew the conference was over.

Was that all? At the same moment, I felt a terrible fatigue descend upon me and realized in what state of tension I had been living since the beginning of the morning. I was terribly disappointed. I thought the real discussion was about to begin. But it wasn't. It was over. The conference was over...

The others present, who had been silent throughout our dialogue, must have understood this too, for I heard a slight hubbub rising behind me.

- I hope you've understood my meaning," said Hitler, turning to the Admiral. Anyone who thinks I'm just another statesman will never understand me. I have no need to resort to small means. Germany and the Axis powers will win the war. That's an indisputable fact. Those who believe otherwise will repent. France can no longer exert any influence on the outcome of the

conflict. I don't need her to win. But she can, depending on her attitude, prolong or shorten the duration of hostilities. If she chooses to prolong them, she will repent. If she chooses to shorten them, I will grant her, in exchange, an advantage proportionate to each positive act she accomplishes in this direction. For a big thing, a big thing; for a little thing, a little thing...

- You mean it's a win-win situation?" interjected the Admiral.

The interpreter, Schmidt, couldn't find an equivalent formula in German, so he cleverly used the Latin phrase *do ut des*, "I give you so that you give me".

- That's right," replied Hitler. This isn't haggling, it's a simple precaution. After all the trouble I've been through with the return of the Duke of Reichstadt's ashes, I have good reason to be on my guard. But Franco-German relations are above all a question of trust.

- That's my opinion too," opined the Admiral. But trust, like a plant, needs to be watered. For it to grow, the people to whom it is asked must be given certainty about their future. In this respect, we are in complete darkness. Today, our relations are governed by the Armistice Agreement. It's a transitional state. What will our fate be tomorrow? What will your terms of peace be?

- I've already told you how I see things," Hitler replied sternly, "so don't ask me to put it in writing. It's too early. Besides, it would be contrary to your own interests. The war is evolving day by day. In a few months' time, when certain current operations have reached their full extent, I'll be able to offer you more favorable terms than today...

I can't help but think of the crowds of our compatriots who have been languishing behind barbed wire for almost a year, and whose misery increases with every day they wait.

- Couldn't you at least give us back our prisoners?

- For my part," he replied, "I wouldn't mind. What do you want me to do with them? Feed them while they do nothing? I've got enough to feed the German people! But I'm not the only one fighting the war. There's also the opinion of my generals. I have to take them into account. When I started releasing prisoners - and I've already returned a fair number to you - some of them protested. How do you expect us to order our men to take prisoners," they said, "if we're going to send them straight back to

their homes, while they have to keep on fighting? You're cutting off our arms and legs! I can't disagree with them. The war isn't over... I still need them...

A menacing glint seemed to pass through his eyes. Then turning to the Admiral:

- You told me that, in order to win back France's friendship, I must not undermine her territorial unity or the integrity of her empire. My answer is, first of all, that it's up to you to win back Germany's friendship. Secondly, if I understand you correctly, you would like to return to the pre-1939 state? But you forget that in the meantime you declared war on me and lost! It's certainly not Germany that will pay the price. If you'd beaten us and held us at your mercy, do you think you'd grant us such generous terms? Not if your war propaganda is anything to go by. All it talked about was the dismemberment of Germany...

"However, I have no intention of doing the same to you. To do so would be to perpetuate discord that has already done us too much harm. But to do so, you must give up your role as Central European policeman. Those days are over. There is, of course, the problem of Alsace-Lorraine. When I saw President Laval in Montoire, he told me: "Alsace-Lorraine is the child of divorce. If we could reach a lasting agreement, this problem would no longer exist. Before the war, I had renounced all claims to these territories. You didn't believe me. Too bad for you. However, I have no intention of inflicting on France a mutilation that will generate new conflicts. I'll leave you Lorraine, which is not German territory. Alsace is different, because it's Germanic. But I have no intention of suddenly annexing it to the Reich. I envisage an intermediate solution that would leave it a certain margin of autonomy. At the very least, we could consider making it a sort of buffer region between Germany and France, with all the bodies responsible for the economic organization of Europe based in Strasbourg.

"As for your overseas possessions, I have no designs on them. I'm telling you once and for all. The future of the Reich lies in another direction. I see no reason why you shouldn't keep them, with the obvious exception of the former German colonies which you wrested from us by the Treaty of Versailles and which must be returned to us.

"However, here too, I'm not alone. I have an ally whom I must

spare: Mussolini. If I agreed to all your demands, he would take umbrage. But he's at my side, and he represents a military auxiliary that I have no right to neglect: battleships, torpedo boats, submarines, aircraft, plus a number of infantry divisions. What can France bring me in exchange?... Nothing or almost nothing...

"What's more, Mussolini's views on Africa and the Mediterranean are very different from mine. He has long been calling for Corsica, Tunisia, Djibouti, you name it... I can't tell him outright: "You're not going to get all that" without at least offering him some compensation in return: I'm talking about Egypt, Cyprus, a sphere of influence in Greece and the Balkans, which will take his eyes off the western Mediterranean. Only Egypt isn't mine yet. We have to give Rommel time to get to Cairo. It won't be long, but there too, you'd better be patient. Think about it and make the most of it, but don't ask me to tell you anything more for the moment.

With that, Hitler extended his hand to the Admiral, signaling that the meeting was over. Darlan, La Monneraye and Fontaine headed for the exit, escorted by Ribbentrop, Abetz, Schleier and Schmidt, while I returned to the table to put away the maps and documents spread out there.

As is always the case when you want to hurry, you get irritated and lose time. That's what happened to me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the cards into my briefcase. As some of them were very large, I had to unfold and refold them several times. Two or three minutes passed in total silence. Night was falling. Shadows were beginning to invade the room.

This irritating work had taken up all my attention. When I looked up, I was surprised to see the Chancellor standing beside me. His forehead barred by his legendary wick, his face was even sadder than when we first arrived, and it seemed to me that his eyes were filled with tears. I was stunned by this unexpected appearance.

I was convinced that the room was empty and that the Führer had left at the same time as the Admiral.

The moment I caught sight of him, I realized that he hadn't taken his eyes off me for a moment. His gaze fixed me insistently and seemed to be asking me an unspoken question. Was he

waiting for me to say something, or was I mistaken? In any case, he suddenly appeared to me in a very different guise to the ones I'd seen him in before. This was no longer the thaumaturge lost in his dreams, monologuing in front of a pyramid of burning logs, nor the strategist meticulously interrogating me on the problems of the Middle East. It was a third Hitler, even more enigmatic than the others, the one of whom Goebbels had once said to the Prince of Schaumburg-Lippe: "I've worked with him for years, I see him almost every day, and yet there are moments when he completely escapes me. Who can claim to see him as he is? In the world of absolute fatality in which he moves, nothing makes sense any more, neither good nor evil, and not even what men call success can serve as a yardstick. Maybe you'll think I'm crazy, but listen to what I have to say: it's not impossible that Hitler will lead us to disaster. But beyond the disaster, his transformed ideas will resurface with new strength. Hitler has many enemies in the world: they know his true dimensions. But I don't think he has a single friend who realizes this, apart from me. And yet, what he is in the final analysis, I don't know. Is he really a man? I couldn't swear to it. There are moments when he gives me the shivers. ■

For a split second, I wondered if I wasn't going to break the silence and tell him everything that was on my mind, to shout that his assertions hadn't convinced me, that we hadn't come to Berchtesgaden just to hear him rail against England, that this was about France, its future, its children. I knew that never again would I find myself alone before him, without unwelcome witnesses, face to face with the man who held the fate of Europe in his hands, and whose power was so absolute that his slightest will had the force of law. In this supreme moment, a single word, a single gesture could still change everything. I certainly didn't lack the arguments, nor the desire to tell him how derisory I thought the meager "give and take" he had established was. I was in full possession of my means. I had never felt so sure of myself. Never had I seen my objectives more clearly: to persuade him that the historic moment had come to impose fair and lasting frontiers on the nations of Europe, to put an end to territorial quarrels and move at last to the stage of continental organization. He had the power to do so, since a succession of dazzling victories had placed in his hands all the territory between the

Atlantic and Russia. But I was paralyzed by my ignorance of what he and the Admiral had said to each other during their tête-à-tête. Wouldn't reopening the discussion after my boss had left be considered an impropriety by the Chancellor and a lack of loyalty by Admiral Darlan? Besides, I sensed an invisible wall separating us - an abyss that a few words wouldn't be enough to bridge. It would take hours. Already, Admiral Darlan must have been astonished at my tardiness... Controlling my inner turmoil, I decided to keep quiet. But it was not without heartbreak. After all," I said to myself, "there's nothing we can do about fate. Let's just let it happen.

I finished putting my files in my briefcase and turned to the Reich Chancellor to take my leave of him. Anticipating my gesture, he bowed slightly to me and said: "Thank you", in an accent so painful that it distressed me.

I bowed without saying a word and quickly left the room.

It was completely dark when the car pulled out of the Berghof. We had to pick up the pace to join the Admiral's car, which had preceded us on the Munich freeway. The interpreter Paul Schmidt and Schwartzmann ' were seated on my left in the back seat, while Mr. Stiack was seated next to the driver. We drove for almost three hours. Everyone was silent, absorbed in their own thoughts.

And I even more than my fellow travelers. I was

■ In charge of French affairs in Ribbentrop's cabinet. went up to the Berghof with the hope of broadening Franco-German negotiations, and I came back down with a feeling of discouragement. Where did it come from? All things considered, things hadn't gone badly. There had been no banging on the table, no outbursts. Hitler hadn't made any new demands and, in the absence of formal guarantees, we were at least bringing back some appeasement.

But there was a disturbing contrast between the breadth of his "planetary" views and the narrowness of the procedures in which he intended to keep us, procedures from which not a hint of coercion was excluded. In truth, my concern stemmed not from

what Hitler had said, or not said, but from something deeper in his very nature, of which I had become more clearly aware through this direct contact. In all the time I had been in his presence, not once had he spoken of France as a living being, with its own existence, history and personality, but only as a mass with unpredictable reactions, likely to facilitate or thwart his designs. I had the impression that foreign countries - with the exception of England - were of interest to him only insofar as they could be used to his advantage. I wondered if Europe was anything more to him than a mere geographical entity which he intended to rule at will, and whose limits, constantly enlarged by the advance of his armies, would eventually stretch from the Atlantic to the Urals...

Of course, I couldn't blame him for being concerned about the future of his people. But I was worried to discover that it was his *exclusive* preoccupation. In his hands, the world was undergoing a brutal simplification. Integrating those who helped him, breaking down those who resisted him, seemed to be the alpha and omega of his entire policy. It was as if he only expected a foreign people to react in exactly the same way as he did. He found it incomprehensible, even scandalous, that the vanquished were not unanimous in wreathing him - even though he had not defined their fate. But at the same time, those who agreed with him aroused in him an instinctive distrust, for the shy nationalist in him would then get the better of him, and he would tell himself that in their place, he would never have acted in such a way. For him, dominate or die seemed the only alternative. That's why, having almost never succeeded in rallying or convincing, he had always had to conquer and crush in the end. Perhaps he saw this as an inevitability due to the bad faith and malignity of his enemies. But, to a very large extent, this fate was within him.

Would he be able to rise above his role as Germanic Caesar to become the federator of Europe? The way he was going about it, it was doubtful. Certainly, he had made no demands of France other than those we already knew. But neither had he loosened his grip. Contrary to my expectations, he was unwilling to examine all the problems that the prolongation of the war posed for our two countries. Worse still, throughout the conference, he had shown an indifference towards France that seemed to me more dangerous than threats, as it left the door open to all

possibilities. What did he really want? To hold out a hand or to keep France down? Was Abetz to be believed when he told me: "It wasn't on June 24, 1940; it was on December 13 that you lost the game. By returning the ashes of the King of Rome to France, the Führer wanted to make a grand gesture of appeasement, to bridge the gap between the victor and the vanquished. You're in a good position to know that I'm telling you the truth, as you were at the origin of this affair. But what did the French claim? That he had staged the whole thing just to lure the Marshal into a trap, take him prisoner and keep him at his mercy. Since then, his confidence in the French had been seriously shaken. He told himself that they understood only one language: that of force, and that he had to treat them accordingly. It's distressing, but that's the way it is. Before December 13, all hopes were permitted. Since then, your chances of obtaining an easing of the armistice conditions have singularly diminished."

It was obvious. But in that sense, you had to have the courage to face the facts. I wasn't responsible for the declaration of war, the armistice or the events of December 13. But, whether I liked it or not, it was all part of the situation I had inherited when I arrived at Matignon. I had to learn "to wash myself with dirty water", as Nietzsche put it. Yet I hadn't joined the government to contribute to the enslavement of my country. I had entered it to help erase the consequences of its defeat, to contribute to its recovery, to ensure its active participation in the reconstruction of the continent. I had chosen this path because it seemed to me to be the only one in line with my country's best interests, the only one capable of sparing it further hardship. It also seemed to me to correspond to the profound aspirations of Europe's youth. Finally, it was the only one that truly took into account the lessons of history. It seemed unimaginable to me that Hitler could see things any other way. What was the point of accumulating so much power in his hands, if he was to do nothing with it?

But his ambiguous attitude had planted a seed of doubt in my mind. I wondered whether, with him, not everything boiled down to a succession of armed confrontations. There's no doubt that before 1939, France was very much on his mind. Since then, defeated and occupied, "she was no longer a force to be reckoned with". In the world of steel and fire in which he moved, nations existed only in terms of the number of armored divisions they



could field against him.

As a war leader, it was undoubtedly her right to reason in this way. But we had to be honest: committed as it was, the policy of "collaboration" could lead nowhere. Full of gloomy forebodings, I drew the necessary conclusion from these observations, and resolved to hand in my resignation to the Admiral as soon as we returned to Vichy.

By the time we arrived in Munich, it was past 10 o'clock. Accustomed to going to bed regularly at half past 10, the Admiral retired to his room as soon as dinner was over, so I had no time to compare my impressions with his.

Unable to fall asleep, I decided to relax by taking a walk into town. Crossing the hotel's sparsely lit lobby, I spotted Abetz. He was engaged in a lively conversation with Mr. Schwartzmann. As both were speaking in hushed tones, I kept my distance. They both seemed rather agitated. When Mr. Schwartzmann had finished, I took the ambassador aside and made a last-ditch effort to get the negotiations out of the rut they were getting into.

- When it comes to collaboration," I tell him, "the one who seems least inclined to it is the Chancellor himself. His "give and take" policy doesn't ring true. It will be a perpetual source of friction and disputes. He has said that he is not a statesman like the others and does not need to resort to small means. Fair enough. But then, I beg you, intervene with him to get him to look at Franco-German relations from a broader angle. Tell him to make use of the only indisputable prerogative of the victor...

- Which one?

- The initiative...

- That's hardly possible," Abetz replied with a worried look. I know what he thinks about it. He thinks it's up to you to make the first move...

- But how does he want us to do them?" I exclaimed angrily. We're chained, bound and gagged! We made a gesture when we let the planes through to Iraq. Let him make one in his turn. What do I know? Let him loosen our chains, give us back our prisoners, tell us what place he has in store for us in tomorrow's Europe...

- You've already got a lot," retorted Abetz. Don't ask for too

much at once. As a result of Vichy double-dealing and intrigues, the Chancellor has lost confidence in the Marshal's government. It's up to you to restore it.

- It's my turn to tell you that it's not easy...

Abetz stared at me gravely.

- Serving your country is never easy. When you agreed to take charge of the Franco-German negotiations, did you think you were undertaking an easy task?

I remained silent for a moment.

- Of course not," I replied in a low voice.

Then, after another silence, I added:

- If only we could see clearly! If only we knew where we were going! You see, one fact troubled me more than the others. Throughout our visit, not for a moment did Hitler mention France. It seemed to hold no place in his thoughts. He thinks only of England.

- That's terribly true," replied the ambassador. But you don't know the real reason. I'll tell you," he continued, lowering his voice and glancing around to make sure no one was listening. I'm telling you this under the seal of secrecy, because the news has not yet been made public. Rudolf Hess flew to Scotland yesterday afternoon.

- Rudolf Hess? The Führer's deputy?

I thought I was dreaming, so extravagant was this news to me. I'd seen many extraordinary things during the day, but this time...

- He left Augsburg yesterday at 6:10 p.m., just as we were arriving in Munich. He was alone on board a Messerschmitt 110, which he piloted himself.

- So he's an aviator?

- Oh yes! But the Führer has forbidden him to use military aircraft, for fear of an accident. Just think, he's his successor at the head of the Party!

- And where is he now?

- Since his departure, there has been no news of him. Due to the rather limited range of this model of aircraft, it is thought that he was unable to reach the coast of England, and that he must have sunk somewhere in the North Sea.

- What does the B.B.C. say?

- English radio is mute.

- What a story! The Führer must be very sorry!
- You're not there at all. The Führer is beside himself.
- Didn't he know?
- No, he didn't. Hess's departure was without his knowledge.

I didn't know what to think. So, Hitler's most loyal lieutenant, the one he had appointed to be his successor, had gone over to the camp of his enemies without telling him?

Suddenly, I had an idea.

- What time did the Chancellor hear the news? Since we left the Berghof?

- Not at all. This morning, a little before 10 o'clock.

- In other words, *before* we arrived?

- Yes, it was Captain Pintsch, Hess's aide-de-camp, who brought it to him. The Führer was at a conference with Dr. Todt and Speer, when Pintsch came to the Berghof and asked to see him. The Führer replied that he was not to be disturbed. Pintsch insisted, saying he carried an important message from Rudolf Hess. For peace's sake, Hitler received it. The aide-de-camp handed him a letter, which the Führer opened. As soon as he read the first lines, he turned livid. As he read on, his agitation grew.

When he reached the end of the message, he let out an inarticulate, almost animal-like scream. Speer heard it from the second floor where he had retreated. Barely a minute later, Hitler called Bormann and ordered him to telephone Ribbentrop, Goering, Goebbels and Himmler, summoning them immediately to the Berghof. As General Ernst Udet was nearby...

- Udet? The famous aviator?

- Yes, I know him. Do you know him?

- Very good! I met him several times in Paris with Fonck and Détroyat, when the latter rivalled him in aerial acrobatics...

- The Führer asked him about Hess's chances of reaching England. Udet went to find out and replied by telephone: "None. By now, he must have crashed into the sea." A glimmer of hope appeared on Hitler's face. If only he could drown in the North Sea," he grumbled, "he'd disappear without a trace. That would give us time to issue a harmless statement. ■ But that hope was too fragile to bank on.

"As the minutes passed, Hitler's anger only grew. The disastrous consequences of Hess's departure presented themselves to his mind one after the other. It would ruin all his plans and

unravel the Three-Party Pact signed between Berlin, Rome and Tokyo, for Mussolini and Matsuoka could well deduce that he himself had sent Hess to London and had entered into secret talks with England behind their backs. If so, they would be quick to do the same, so as not to be caught unawares.

"The Führer started walking feverishly up and down his office. As Paul Schmidt told me earlier, it was as if a bomb had fallen on the Berghof. In the twinkling of an eye, Hess's entire staff, including his aides-de-camp Pintsch and Leitgen, as well as a large part of the personnel working at the Augsburg air base, were arrested and locked up... Hitler was shaking all over. He didn't know how to present the matter to public opinion, for the event had caught him completely off guard. "He's mad, completely mad", he repeated mechanically. Ribbentrop told me that his despondency was a sight to behold. Faced with the general disarray, the Reich Foreign Minister turned to Goebbels and urged him to speed up the drafting of a communiqué. Goebbels replied: "There are situations that the best propagandist in the world cannot overcome. I consider Hess's adventure to be more serious than the desertion of an army corps..." Of course, keep all this to yourself!

- Of course... With the exception of the Admiral, to whom I must report.

- Wait at least until tomorrow. Maybe there'll be something new.

- I promise.

Suddenly, many things became clear to me that I hadn't grasped before. The lines of cars with Goering and Himmler that we'd passed on the way up to Obersalzberg; the Führer's overwhelmed face, his tear-filled eyes and his resemblance to the photo taken the day after Rohm's execution; his obsession with England, and even certain phrases in his monologue in front of the fireplace: "... and we poor fools who refuse to understand England's real game, the more we obey an ideal and the more we let ourselves be seduced by its siren songs...". All this, no doubt, had something to do with Hess's fugue. I understood all the more his tragic expression and why France was totally absent from his thinking. All day, without realizing it, we'd been walking on a volcano. What bad luck, to have fallen into the Berghof in the

middle of this drama!

- But tell me, our visit must have seemed very inappropriate," I couldn't help remarking.

- According to the original program," Abetz replied, "you were to be received around noon at the Berghof. This initial contact was to be followed by lunch at Ribbentrop's, and then by a second working session. But when the Führer learned of Hess's departure, he wanted to cancel everything. He didn't want to see anyone. It was Ribbentrop who talked him out of it and saved the day. You and the Admiral were already on your way to Salzburg. The Foreign Minister argued that sending you back to France without having received you and without being able to give you any explanation would be seen as a slap in the face. As Hitler had summoned Goering, Himmler, Goebbels and Bormann to the Berghof to discuss with them the measures to be taken to limit the upheaval caused by Hess's departure, he asked Ribbentrop to receive you at Fuschl and to keep you waiting until the afternoon.

The Admiral had made no mistake: seeing that Ribbentrop had nothing to say to him, he had concluded that he was simply trying to buy time.

- No matter how much I rack my brains," I tell Abetz, "I can't imagine what motives the Führer's lieutenant could have had.

- Me neither," he replied.

- Do you know what was in the letter brought by his aide-de-camp?

Therein lay the key to the mystery.

- No, I don't know that. All I know is that our press services have been instructed to make him look crazy. But we all know in Germany that he's not. You can't take away from me the fact that his departure is correlated with your visit. Hess represented the Anglophile wing of the Party. Raised in Alexandria, he had always dreamed of an alliance between the Reich and the British Empire. Perhaps he feared that an improvement in Franco-German relations would make an agreement with England more difficult?

I didn't find this explanation convincing. Like so many people, Abetz saw things through his own personal lens. I shook my head in denial.

- I don't think so," I replied. His trip must have had quite

different motives. We'll probably have to wait a few days to find out.

The case was far too complicated to form an opinion without further information. But the little I knew forced me to revise most of my judgments.

I had attributed Hitler's reluctance to enter into an in-depth discussion of our problems to the fact that he considered France to be a negligible factor, and even to the desire to keep her in long-term subjugation. I suddenly realized that the sort of absent-mindedness with which he had received us stemmed from the fact that his thoughts were entirely taken up with Hess's departure, the outcome of which he was still unaware of, and the consequences of which he was confusedly trying to gauge. Hence the lack of interest in anything we had to say. In some respects, he had done us a favor, the price of which we didn't know, by receiving us at such a time. We had come to talk to him about the transit of some planes to Iraq, while his mind was at the epicenter of a cyclone whose effects could spread to London, Rome, Tokyo and Moscow. I could only admire the mastery with which he and his entourage had kept their preoccupations to themselves. But wasn't there also something vexing in their deliberate way of keeping us out of the game? I was mortified. Exasperated, too, at the thought that if we'd arrived at the Berghof forty-eight hours earlier, things might have turned out quite differently.

The next day, May 12, Abetz came knocking at my door at 9 o'clock in the morning.

- Here's the press release that the German radio will be broadcasting shortly," he says, handing me a ticker tape. Now that the news is going to be made public, there's no reason why you shouldn't tell the Admiral.

I took the paper and read:

*"Party authorities communicate: Rudolf Hess, expressly forbidden by the Führer to fly a plane because he was suffering from an illness that had only worsened over the years, has violated this order.*

*"Having succeeded in procuring an airplane,*

*Hess set off from Augsburg on Saturday, May 10, at around 1 p.m., on a flight from which he did not return. Unfortunately, the letter he left behind reveals symptoms of mental disorder that justify the fear that he may have been the victim of hallucinations.*

*"The Führer immediately ordered the arrest of Hess's aides-de-camp, who alone knew about his flights. Despite the Führer's ban, they had neither prevented his departure, nor reported the matter without delay. Under these circumstances, the National Socialist movement is forced to assume that party member Hess crashed his plane or perished in a similar accident."*

- What do you think?" asked Abetz.
- I think this press release is no good. It won't convince anyone.
- That's my opinion too. Who would believe that the Führer had chosen a madman to be his successor? Moreover, this text expresses a certain embarrassment. That's because we still don't know what happened to Hess.
- What do the English say?
- They observe total silence. We are swimming in mystery...

As soon as Abetz had left, I went to see the Admiral, to inform him of the event and the impact Hess's escapade had had on our visit to the Berghof. He didn't seem overly moved by the news. He saw it above all as an episode in the clandestine struggle between opposing coteries within the National Socialist Party. The Admiral didn't have time to talk to me about what Hitler had told him during their tête-à-tête, as we had to go to Fuschl immediately. A second meeting had been scheduled with M. von Ribbentrop, after which the Reich Foreign Minister was to detain us for lunch.

I have only a vague recollection of this meeting. I do remember, however, that Ribbentrop insisted that while the Führer had no claim on our empire, this did not absolve us from defending it if attacked. In this respect, General Dentz's attitude would serve as a touchstone. I also remember that, in response to a question from the Admiral about Russia, the Reich Foreign Minister replied:

- I don't know if we'll go to war with the U.S.S.R. But if we do,

we'll bring Russia to its knees in less than three months.

Needless to say, neither the Admiral nor I could share this optimism. Whatever the strength or weakness of the Red Army, the U.S.S.R. was a big lump to swallow.

When this conversation was over, we went back down to the ground-floor lounge, where Abetz informed us, with marked embarrassment, that the Minister apologized for not being able to keep us for lunch, as he had just been urgently summoned to the Berghof. So off we went to Salzburg, where General Warlimont, the Führer's Chief of Staff, was waiting in his place. We were served a meal in a private room of the *FÖsterreichischer Hof*. Before sitting down at the table, the Admiral winked at me mischievously and said, putting one hand in front of his mouth:

- I hope you're not going to tell me, in a few moments, that Goering has suddenly flown to Moscow?

Even in the most difficult times, the Gascon at home never lost his rights...

As soon as lunch was over, we headed back to Munich. This time, protocol had placed me in Abetz's car. During the journey, the ambassador took the opportunity to tell me why the Foreign Minister had been unable to keep us for lunch: he'd had to rush off to Rome.

- Following a leak," he tells me, "the radio in French-speaking Switzerland has divulged your presence at Berchtesgaden. The London B.B.G. has seized on this information and is claiming to the winds that Admiral Darlan has gone to see Hitler to "sell off" your African possessions. We know that the truth is diametrically opposed. But Mussolini and Ciano took advantage of the situation to raise their voices.

- They're basically defending our interests," I said, laughing, to the ambassador. That's very kind of them. But we'll take care of that ourselves...

- I know something about that," he replied. But just as you always dread a compromise peace between the Reich and England, which would cost you everything, the Italians dread a Franco-German entente, which would come at their expense, because it would put an end to their dream of Mediterranean hegemony.

- They have a jealous lover's complex towards the Reich....



- Exactly. It was to calm them down that the Führer asked Ribbentrop to go to Rome immediately. Make no mistake: the Duce is one of the greatest obstacles to any rapprochement between France and Germany. Don't forget that it's because of him that Hitler didn't want to specify his peace terms.

So, according to Abetz, England on one side, Italy on the other! It was all a lot of hullabaloo for a meeting from which, in the end, very little had emerged. I could see how a lasting agreement between France and Germany would strengthen our position. In the absence of proof, I only had to look at the anxiety of all those whose plans it thwarted. But despite Abetz's assertions, I remained skeptical. In my opinion, Ribbentrop's lightning trip to Rome was motivated less by our visit to the Berghof than by Hess's departure. There must have been a big catch.

\*

Arriving in Munich, we went straight to the station, where our special train was waiting for us, lined up along a platform. Although it wasn't due to leave until 2 a.m., the Admiral wanted to be there by 10 a.m., so he could go to bed at his usual time. We took leave of Abetz and Mr. Strack and headed for our cabins. I had already drifted off to sleep when, a little after midnight, I was awakened by repeated knocks on my door. It was a steward announcing Abetz's unexpected visit. I quickly slipped a robe over my pyjamas and made my way to the lounge car where the ambassador was waiting. He was dressed in a large feldgrau coat with white lapels and looked very agitated.

- The English have finally broken the silence," he tells me. About half an hour ago, the BBC issued a brief statement announcing that Hess had landed in Scotland, not far from Dungavel House, the home of the Duke of Hamilton, whom he had met at the 1936 Olympic Games. The plane crashed on impact, but Hess was unhurt. He would have escaped with a fractured ankle.

So the Führer's lieutenant had arrived at his destination. He had not sunk into the North Sea as the Chancellor had hoped.

- And what does Hitler say?

- I haven't seen him since we left the Berghof, but I phoned

Hewel. He told me that the news had sent him into a deep prostration. He fears that the British are drugging his lieutenant, in order to get him to make God-knows-what statements on the radio. But what he fears most of all is that Hess will reveal to his interlocutors certain military preparations in progress, which would be catastrophic. I wanted you to know before I left Munich.

- What preparations?

- I don't know. I only know that Hitler received Halder and Keitel this afternoon. It's all very strange!

The train was already under pressure. Jets of steam shot out from under the carriages. I took leave of the ambassador and led him back to the platform. The station was plunged into complete darkness, due to the blackout. Dear Abetz, cuckolded architect of the Franco-German rapprochement! We had just spent some unforgettable hours together. It was with a heavy heart that I watched him disappear into the night.

The next morning, May 13, I went to breakfast with the Admiral in the dining car. He was in excellent spirits, feeling "fresh as a daisy", as he put it. As we drove through the Baden countryside, he filled me in on the first part of his interview with Hitler, during which I had been locked in the small salon.

- The Chancellor, he explained, began by pointing out that he had been very generous in granting the *quid pro quo*s we had asked for, in exchange for the passage of the planes to Iraq; that he had instructed his representatives in France not to be petty in discussing the terms of execution, but that in the end, the operation had ended in disappointment for him. Most of the planes had broken down in Aleppo. Only four Messerschmitt had reached their destination, and he was reluctant to send any more, as the engine seals, made of synthetic rubber, had not withstood the temperature of the region. So, in exchange for the return of almost three hundred thousand prisoners, a reduction of 100 million per day in the occupation indemnity and a series of other advantages included in the May 5th agreement, Germany had obtained only a disappointing result.

"To this I replied that it wasn't our fault that the Stukas' engines weren't suited to the climate and that the help given to Rachid Ali had come too late; that we had exposed ourselves to

considerable risks, that these remained and that it seemed fair to us that they should be covered by equivalent insurance, namely ;

"Firstly, our overseas territories had to be given the means to defend themselves, since they could be the object of English reprisals at any time;

"Secondly, we needed the assurance that the empire would not be taken away from us when the peace treaty was signed, because we had no reason to spill the blood of our soldiers to defend territories that we would then have to hand over to Germany or Italy.

"I added that for my part, I formally refused to do so, that I would rather *leave* right now than give in on this point, and that this was why I had asked, from the start of the negotiations, that the integrity of our overseas territories be guaranteed to us.

I knew the Admiral well enough to know he wasn't bluffing. I also knew that the threat of his departure - which risked dragging all our high seas forces into dissent - was the strongest argument he could throw into the balance.

- And what was the Chancellor's reaction?

- He remained pensive for a moment, then told me that he had no designs on Syria, nor on any of our African or Asian possessions, apart from Togo and Cameroon, which had once belonged to Germany and would have to be returned. It would undoubtedly be necessary to provide for a minor rectification of borders in southern Tunisia and an arrangement in Djibouti for the benefit of Italy, but apart from that, he didn't want to take anything away from us, and wouldn't even mind if we expanded our domain.

- How so?

- Including Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

- But these are English colonies?

- That's not going to stop him.

- But how does he do it?

- There was no doubt in his mind that England had been defeated. His argument was as follows: since she had refused all his offers of alliance and peace - the first before the outbreak of hostilities, the second after the Polish campaign, the third in the wake of the French campaign - he was determined to expel her from Africa and counted on Japan to do the same in Asia. He

would have liked to save the British Empire, he remarked incidentally. But Churchill was a blind man who couldn't see where he was leading his country. England will learn the cost of his obstinacy the hard way. He even added that its disappearance as a great power would cause a dangerous vacuum in the balance of the planet, and that he intended to remedy this by carrying out a vast redistribution of land in Africa. I have to admit 1, the man blew my mind, as he seems to see no limit to his power.

- What does that mean?

- This war," he explained to me, "is Europe's last chance to build itself up solidly enough to face up victoriously to the great struggles of the future, which will no longer be wars between nations, but between continents. To achieve this, Europe will need two shields: one to the west, stretching from Narvik to Dakar, to protect us against America's designs; the other to the east, stretching from Murmansk to the Persian Gulf, to protect us against Asia's pressures. The Western shield will be Atlantic and naval. The Germans, he believes, will not be well placed to hold it, as they have never been good sailors. This is due both to their lack of tradition and to their geographical position. They are, on the other hand, marvellous infantrymen. For a moment, he thought of entrusting this shield to England, which is why he spared her for so long. But England preferred to tie its fate to that of America. It is no longer an issue. He has therefore resolved to entrust this role to France. After the war, he envisaged the creation of a European navy, in which the French fleet and the Kriegsmarine would be integrated, but whose command he would be willing to entrust to a French admiral.

■ As for the eastern shield, it would comprise two sectors. The northern sector would run from the White Sea to the Caspian Sea, roughly following the ridges of the Urals. He's got his own thing going on there. German units would stand guard there...

- But what is Russia's role in all this?

- I don't know anything about it. He didn't mention it.

- And Ribbentrop?

- No more, apart from the few words he said yesterday morning.

- Strange...

- Very strange indeed. But there's more. The southern sector, which would stretch from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf - this

time it's not the Chancellor, it's Abetz who told me - Hitler would gladly entrust it to France, and that's why he wants us to stay in Syria. We could later add Iraq. It's a role, it seems, that Mussolini covets. But Hitler doesn't trust the Italian army enough to hand over the defense of a European niche. His intention would be to confine Italy to the interior of Europe and limit its influence to the eastern Mediterranean. With Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Egypt, Sudan, 1 Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, that would still be a nice chunk for Italy...

- When did Abetz tell you this?

- In the car taking us back from the Berghof to Munich.

- Are you sure he wasn't expressing a personal opinion?

- I don't believe it. He would never have said such things to me if the Führer hadn't asked him to.

- What about Africa?

- Now you're going to be even more surprised. Hitler wants to reshape everything, except the Spanish and Portuguese possessions. France will be able to keep everything it already holds there. If Germany were to take something, it would be the Belgian Congo, which would receive a corridor from northern Angola to the west and form a block with Kenya and British Tanganyika to the east, giving it a double opening to the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

- This will be a very hard blow for the Belgians...

- That's what I said to myself. But in tomorrow's Europe, as conceived by Hitler, Belgium will no longer exist.

- Ah?

- In his eyes, it's an artificial country, whose two constituent ethnic groups will never see eye to eye. If Wallonia wants to join France, he won't stand in the way. As for Flanders, it will go to Holland, with which it will reconstitute the Netherlands as it existed in 1815. England will no longer be able to veto the union, which will be facilitated by a marriage between a Belgian prince and a Dutch princess. As a joyous gift, Hitler would hand over South Africa, which had been colonized by the Boers before England took it over...

This waltz of territories was beginning to make me dizzy.

- And what do you think of all this?" I asked the Admiral. He pouted.

- Hitler is free to indulge in this kind of speculation, but I

assure you I'm not interested. It's all very well to want to build the world for the next thousand years, but it lacks realism. If Hitler thinks he's baiting me by dangling the command of Europe's future navy in front of my eyes, he's mistaken. And if he were a sailor, he'd be more wary of wind shifts. The future can hold many surprises! In our current situation, we need to tighten our sails and sail as close as possible. Expanding our empire? We'll see about that later. For now, let's try to hold on to what we already have.

\*

Around 11 a.m., we arrived at the Gare de l'Est, where we were greeted by the Prefect of the Seine, the Prefect of Police and M. de Brinon, Delegate General in the occupied territories. The latter had a quarter-hour tête-à-tête with Admiral Darlan in his lounge car, while I paced the platform to stretch my legs. After which, our train set off again for Vichy, where the B.B.C. broadcasts had done much to stir the noble consciences who had taken it upon themselves - somewhat belatedly - to "save the national heritage at all costs".

The weather was heavy. There was not a breath of air. The city was having one of those bad days when it smells like a clogged sink and a dead frog.

I went straight to my office at the 1\*Hôtel du Parc, to look through the dispatches that had accumulated there during my absence. Jean Lombard, my chief of staff, had arranged them in order of arrival. But before giving me the complete file, he drew my attention to a press release that the radio had just broadcast that morning:

*"From an initial examination of the papers left by Hess, it appears that he was under the influence of a hallucinatory delusion which led him to believe that by initiating action himself with certain British citizens, whom he knew personally, he could facilitate an agreement between Germany and Great Britain. As confirmed by a report from London, Hess parachuted over Scotland and landed at his chosen location. There, he was found with an injured ankle.*

*"It is well known in Party circles that Hess has suffered a great deal physically in recent years. He has recently*

*sought relief from hypnotists, astrologers and the like. It is currently being investigated to what extent these people are responsible for the mental disorders that led Hess to act in this way. It is also possible that he was deliberately lured into a trap by the British. However, his behaviour as a whole confirms, as already announced in an initial press release, that he is suffering from hallucinations.*

*o Hess knew better than anyone the sincerity of the Führer's peace proposals. It seems he deluded himself into thinking he could prevent, by personal sacrifice, a development that would inevitably lead to the annihilation of the British Empire.*

*"Judging by the notes he left behind, Hess had no notion of how he could carry out such a mission, or of its possible consequences.*

*"The National Socialist Party deplores the fact that this idealist [I think I recognize in this passage an echo of the Führer's monologue in front of his fireplace] has fallen prey to such a tragic error. The course of the war the British have imposed on the German people will not be affected in the slightest. As the Führer declared in his last speech, the war will go on until the men in power in Great Britain have been overthrown or declare themselves ready for peace."*

Lombard then handed me a confidential report from London, transmitted by our embassy in Lisbon:

*"The Hess plane crashed in a field near Eaglesham, Lanarkshire. The pilot, wounded in the leg, was immediately taken to a barracks in Glasgow, where he is being held in custody.*

*"His arrival has caused the British authorities great embarrassment.*

*"Questioned on the morning of the 11th, and again the same day, late afternoon..."*

I looked up. What a coincidence! So, just as we were listening to Hitler vent his fury against England, Hess was being interrogated by British Security. What could he have said to him that could have aroused such anger in the Chancellor? I resumed my reading:

*" ... Hess was quoted as saying that he had gone to Scotland on his own initiative, to save the British Empire from irretrievable disaster; that Germany was practically invincible; that it was on the eve of undertaking new operations that would give it an enormous increase in territory and economic power; that Germany would then turn to England, to crush it. It was better to make peace first.*

*"According to a generally well-informed source, Hess added (quote); "I have not come to beg for peace, but to offer it. There are four preconditions for this:*

*"1°) England gives Germany a free hand in the East; Germany gives England a free hand in Asia and control of the seas ;*

*"2°) The former German colonies in Africa must be returned to the Reich;*

*"3°) A similar agreement is to be concluded with Italy;*

*"4°) Churchill will have to go and be replaced by another government combination. "(End of quote.)*

*"It is still too early to know the reactions of Her Majesty's Government, but it does not seem that these proposals should be retained."*

- I exclaimed. For a bomb, it sure is! To put it plainly, this means that Germany is preparing to attack Russia; that it intends to bring her down in no time, and that England had better sign the peace treaty first! I understand; the Führer is trembling at the disclosure of his plans!

- If this report is accurate," Lombard objected cautiously.

- I have every reason to believe this, when I compare it with the scenes I witnessed at the Berghof. Hitler must have feared above all that Hess's declarations would enable the British to see through his game. If Churchill told Moscow, all surprise would be over... Is there anything else?

- Yes. A report from Rome, from the canon. - Interesting stuff. Let me see it.

The "Canon" was a former comrade of the Duce, who had gone over to the opposition, but who had kept his ties with the palace.

Venice. From time to time, he would send us information on the activities of Fascist leaders, which he would pass on to us via



Admiral Michelier, chairman of the French delegation to the Turin Armistice Commission.

*Rome, May 12, 1941*

*"Hitler telephoned the Duce this morning to announce Ribbentrop's imminent visit. Nobody here expected him to come. It must be to bring us clarification on Hess's departure, before the British eat the piece. The Führer doesn't want anyone to think he's conniving. He assures us that all current projects will go ahead. He summoned Keitel to order him to speed up preparations.*

*"Rumors circulated in Roman circles that the Reich would soon attack Russia. The Duce and Ciano were not unhappy about this. They wouldn't mind if the Wehrmacht were to push eastwards, as this would force Hitler to relinquish the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean to Italy."*

- I'd be surprised. Are there any other dispatches?

- Four or five; I've classified them according to their provenance.

I take a bundle of blue peels in my hand and run through them quickly.

*From London, via Lisbon*

*May 11, 1941*

*"During the night of May 10-11, London was subjected to the heaviest aerial bombardment since the start of the Blitz.*

*600 aircraft took part in the attack. 12 aircraft did not return to base."*

- A good introductory card for the unfortunate Hess!

*From Berlin*

*May 11, 1941*

*"Last night 40 to 50 Royal Air Force planes bombed Hamburg for two hours. Fairly heavy damage. 20 dead and 30 wounded.*

*"Air alert over Berlin. Lasted one hour. No casualties.*

*"Martin Bormann was commissioned by the Führer to*

*take over all Hess's services."*

*From Berlin, via Berne*

*May 11, 1941*

*"Stalin was given the presidency of the Council of People's Commissars. This decision is seen as a response to the desire to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the U.S.S.R. and Germany. Over the past few days, the volume of Soviet services has risen sharply."*

*From Bern. Ultra confidential.*

*May 11, 1941*

*"The chiefs of I'O. K. W. discussed the day before yesterday the possibilities of using the Swedish army, should Sweden agree to take part in Operation Barbarossa, alongside Finland, Hungary and Romania."*

- Operation Barbarossa?" I say to Lombard, giving him a quizzical look. What could it be? It's the first time I've seen the name appear in the dispatches.

- I don't know any more than you do," he replied.

There were still two obscure points: the content of the letter Pintsch had delivered to Hitler, and the outcome of Ribbentrop's visit to Rome. But with the elements I already had at my disposal, things were beginning to take shape in a more precise way.

- There's one more thing I find interesting," says Jean Lombard, slipping me a single sheet of paper detached from a notepad. It's information brought to me by Mr. de Lequeirica. He wanted me to send it to you right away, but you were on the road and I didn't know where to reach you. I wrote it down on the fly, because he wouldn't let me have the original, or give me the source:

*"Heavy concentrations of German troops are reported in the Posen region. The cordon of outposts along the German-Russian border, which had fallen to little during February and March, has been considerably reinforced."*

I thought I heard an alarm bell ringing inside me. But I was wrong: it was the telephone. I picked up the receiver and

recognized the Admiral's voice.

- The Marshal is expecting you," he says.

- Okay, fine. I'll be there in a minute.

I stuffed the bundle of dispatches into my briefcase in case I needed them, and headed down to the second floor.

\*

The head of state greeted us at the entrance to the small corner room he used as a lounge, indicated two armchairs and sat down at his desk.

- Gentlemen, I'm listening," he says, folding his hands. I can't wait to hear what you have to say.

This was so unusual for him that I had to suppress a smile. I thought I discerned a hint of irony, because everything in his demeanor belied it. I've seen his face express discontent, even cautalism, but never impatience. It seemed alien to his nature. He always gave the impression of having eternity ahead of him...

The Admiral described the events of our trip with the conciseness and clarity of exposition that were among his best qualities. Nothing was missing, not even the lunch menu we'd been offered in Salzburg. And yet I no longer recognized anything. I wondered if we'd been on the same trip! This was because the Admiral had not mentioned the stormy atmosphere at the Berghof. He had said nothing about Hess's departure or Ribbentrop's trip to Rome. For me, this atmosphere was a crucial element in the situation. It was the only way to get a glimpse of the obstacles that stood - and would continue to stand - in our way. Stripped of this dramatic accompaniment, the exchanges between the Vice-Chairman of the Council and the leader of the III<sup>e</sup> Reich took on a harmless, almost anodyne character. Was the Admiral unaware of this, or was it deliberate? I often wondered about this afterwards. But at the time, I couldn't help thinking that going from Berchtesgaden to Vichy with Admiral Darlan was like going from the *Tetralogy* to the *Bells of Corneville*.

As he continued his talk, I couldn't take my eyes off the Marshal. Eyelids half-closed, head tilted forward, he listened to the Admiral with an attention so devoid of reaction that it gave his features an unexpected expression: that of profound humility! Although I had seen him almost daily for several months, I had to

make an effort to remember that the apparently modest man before me was the victor of Verdun, and that the decrees he signed began with this majestic formula: "Nous, Philippe Pétain, maréchal de France, chef de l'Etat..." (We, Philippe Pétain, Marshal of France, Head of State...). An Olympian calm, a Plutarch-like simplicity and a peasant finesse - which may once have been calculating, but had become natural - had something moving about it. Reassuring too. He was the country's shield, and the French knew it. Like a marble cliff, it seemed as if all the world's storms came to expire at its feet. He couldn't hear them," his detractors would later say. And what did they hear?

When the Admiral had finished speaking, the Marshal uncrossed his hands and raised his head.

- You've done an excellent job," he says, staring at us with his icy gaze. I'm very grateful. We absolutely had to break the deadlock. Give and take! This is serious progress. But it's not without risks. We have to keep this policy within very strict limits. Of course, we have a lot to ask of the Germans. But there are certain things they are likely to ask of us in return, which I will never agree to. I pulled the country out of the war. I don't intend to plunge it back into it. If I turned France against England, the French would never forgive me. If that's what Hitler wants, he's wasting his time. As for the rest, if I've understood you correctly, any German demands will earn us compensation: for a big thing, a big thing; for a little thing, a little thing...

- That's right," replied the Admiral.

- So let's stick to the little ones.

I felt breathless. Not having been able to talk to Hitler when I was alone with him, not having been able to convince him that he was heading for ruin if he didn't curb his appetite for conquest, not having been able to make him understand that his historic mission was to found Europe by purging it of the iniquities that a hundred years of incoherence, blindness and folly had accumulated there, blindness and folly (a man's historic mission is not a creation of the mind, it derives from the powers that circumstances have placed in his hands) had stayed with me like a humiliation, a wound. I knew that this privileged minute, when destiny hung by a thread, would never come back to me. And here was the Marshal, choosing to stick to "the little things", when there was France to remake, the world to rebuild...

- We've resumed negotiations," continued the Marshal after a fairly long pause. But everything is still rather nebulous. You told me that General Warlimont was coming to Paris to discuss replenishing our African army? We'll see what he has to offer. Then we'll see...

This turned the problem on its head, because Warlimont didn't come to offer us anything. We were the ones asking for it...

I tried to correct this misapprehension, pointing out that if we persisted in looking at things from this angle, we could only face further setbacks. I tried to complete the Admiral's presentation by restoring our visit to the Berghof to its true atmosphere. I explained that, although it had been unfortunate for us to have had to talk to Hitler at such a time, this misfortune was offset by an advantage that we had to take advantage of; it had given us a set of clues that Germany would soon be attacking Russia. That day, the whole picture would change, and we urgently needed to take action.

But it was getting late and the Marshal was no longer listening to me with the same attention.

- Let's not rush," he says. We've got time to see what's coming...

- History waits for no man, Monsieur le Maréchal!

He glanced at me sternly, as if I'd said something inappropriate.

- Gentlemen, gentlemen," he continued, consulting a clock on his desk, "every day has its day. We'll have plenty of time to talk about this over the next few days. Right now, I'm due to receive a delegation from the Royat confectioners. They have come to ask me to release an additional quota of saccharine. Despite the sugar shortage, they are still making fruit jellies of surprising quality.

I tried to regain my train of thought. But already a group of confectioners were crowding into the antechamber. Since that day - believe it or not - I've taken a dislike to fruit jellies.

For as we exchanged these light-hearted words in the tranquility of a small spa town, cities were burning, ships were blowing up, soldiers were dying by the thousands every day, in anticipation of new slaughter. The war that was bloodying Europe continued to escalate, but no one seemed to appreciate the importance of what was at stake, no one seemed to see that what was threatened was our civilization itself. Hitler, carried away by

his victories, seemed unable to tolerate any hindrance to his will; Pétain, traumatized by defeat, remained on the defensive, unwilling to take any chances. The dynamism of the one and the wait-and-see attitude of the other were like two millstones turning in opposite directions, biting into each other. Which would wear out first?

I had left the Berghof determined to hand in my resignation to Admiral Darlan. But by the time I reached Munich, Abetz's revelations had given me pause for thought. Far from it. There were still many twists and turns to come. If, by some extraordinary stroke of luck (but in politics, nothing can be ruled out a priori), England, becoming more aware of its interests, were to conclude a compromise peace with the Reich so as not to lose the Indian Empire and its place in the world, as Hess had predicted (but he 'was wrong to be German and to say it too soon), we could only rush in hot on its heels and let ourselves be robbed of all the benefits of the operation. On the other hand, if Germany were to go to war with Russia - which seemed inevitable in the not-too-distant future - perhaps Hitler would realize that he was defending not just the Reich, but the entire continent, that he needed its help, and perhaps this realization would lead him to modify his attitude towards us? So there was still a glimmer of hope, and while that glimmer remained, it had to be defended. I hadn't chosen this path. It had imposed itself on me as early as my military service, what shall I say? as early as Good Friday 1918, when the vault of Saint-Gervais collapsed on our heads. It predated the war, predated Hitler's rise to power, and had become so ingrained in my blood that it was impossible to choose any other. This policy alone weighed so heavily on my shoulders that I came to admire the strength (or unconsciousness) of those of my compatriots who blithely pursued two or three at once. Bringing together two worlds as antinomic as France and Germany was an insane, desperate, almost impossible undertaking for a man who had only his thoughts to oppose a universe in arms, and for all power, the one (always revocable) that his leaders had entrusted to him in a moment of disarray. She had only one chance in a thousand of succeeding, and I knew it. But I also knew that if it failed, Europe would be transformed into a chaos of ruins, and I didn't think much of France's future in the world that Churchill and Stalin would bequeath to us h

The strength of this conviction left me no choice: to resign would have been tantamount to abandoning my post. So I decided to fight on, whatever the cost.

But I could have made my own the words a German colonel was to address to his soldiers six weeks later: "May God help us all, in this terrible battle!"

For the following day, June 22, 3,000,000 men, 600,000 trucks, 3,500 tanks and 7,000 cannons, protected by three air fleets of 1,800 aircraft, crossed the borders of the USSR.

Churchill had sensed this from Hess's statement. He warned Sir Stafford Cripps, then British ambassador to Moscow, who informed Stalin. Stalin, however, was already on his guard. He had ordered the bulk of his armies away from the border, to avoid being surrounded as soon as the offensive began. But this man of nerves of steel, who had decapitated his own general staff and sent more than ten million peasants to their deaths for opposing his collectivization measures, nevertheless experienced a moment of panic: he was seen walking up and down the corridors of the Kremlin, invoking all the holy protectors of Russia.

Overnight, the conflict took on a new scope and content. For, among all the powers it holds,

1. We now know that it was on May 12, 1941, during a meeting with Keitel and Halder, that Hitler set the date for the invasion of Russia. The Admiral and I were driving from Salzburg to Munich at the time. War has the power to accelerate history: it brings about more changes in three months than peace does in ten years.

In the midst of this brutal upheaval, Iraq's planes were largely forgotten. Yet they were soon to come to mind.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BATTLE OF THE PROTOCOLS

(May - June 1941)

In the meantime, events were gathering pace. There was hardly a day in the months of May, June and July 1941 without an important event.

The Admiral and I had returned from the Berghof on May 12 to learn that negotiations concerning the advantages granted to us by the May 5 agreement were running into serious difficulties, particularly those relating to the return of prisoners and the reduction of occupation costs. The latter was of particular concern to Jacques Barnaud, head of our economic delegation to the Wiesbaden Armistice Commission, and to Bréard de Boisanger, Governor of the Banque de France. To better appreciate the importance of the issue, a few explanations are in order.

The armistice agreement, signed in Rethondes on June 22, 1940, specified (Art. 18) that "the maintenance costs of German occupation troops on French territory would be borne by the French government". But when it came to setting the daily amount, the Germans refused. This amount is directly related to the volume of Wehrmacht troops stationed in France", they objected, "to indicate it day by day would be to provide the enemy with a precious indication of the movement of our troops. There could be no question of that. It was therefore agreed to pay a daily lump sum of 20 million Reichsmarks (400 million



francs, the mark being valued at 20 francs at the time). However, experience had shown that this 400 million was far in excess of the German army's needs. The unused balance accumulated in a credit account held by the German military command at the Banque de France. This ever-increasing balance represented a twofold danger for us:

1°) It left the Germans with considerable sums of money, enabling them to make uncontrolled purchases of capital goods, raw materials and agricultural products, which represented a severe drain on our resources;

2°) It gave the Germans the latitude to throw a mass of French banknotes onto the money market, which could lead to a devaluation of the franc.

This shows the importance that our financial managers attached to the disappearance of this credit balance. This could only be achieved by reducing the daily occupancy costs.

It will be recalled that when the May 5 agreement was signed, we had obtained, among other things, a reduction in our payments from 20 to 15 million Reichsmarks, to gradually absorb the German credit balance at the Banque de France. And now Mr. Hemmen, the German financial delegate to the armistice commission, was calling everything into question. After demanding that the 15 million R.M. be paid not in banknotes but in gold, which had provoked the strongest protests from our negotiators, he demanded that, of the 15 million agreed, 5 be paid in transferable currencies. This meant that we had to pay more than before the May 5 agreement. As the two parties were unable to reach an agreement, the May 21 payment was postponed.

That same day, I received an autograph message from Admiral Dailan, in which he said:

*"The May 21 payment had been postponed because negotiations were ongoing. The German government made it known the day before yesterday that the May 21 payment on the basis of 20 (million) R.M. was the condition for the resumption of negotiations.*

*Once again, I see that we are backtracking on the promises made on May 6.*

*If this point is not resolved favorably, I will be obliged to stop everything.*

Clearly, the Admiral was starting to get annoyed. And rightly so, for the pettiness of the process was obvious. We were in an even more uncomfortable position, having already given permission for German planes to transit Syria. We were therefore helpless in the face of Mr. Hemmen's demands.

To avoid aggravating the Admiral's irritation, I thought it best not to remind him that I had warned him (which was perhaps why I was less surprised than he was). On the evening of May 5, when the Admiral had given me the instructions he'd sent to Admiral Gouton, authorizing the passage of German planes, to pass on to Abetz, I had a qualm. I said to him, on the sidewalk of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, as he was getting into his car to return to Vichy:

- Wouldn't it be better to postpone sending this cable until such time as all the terms of application (of the May 5th agreement) have been at least partially implemented?... I fear that subordinate German officials, wishing to show their zeal, will seek to reduce the compensations we have been granted. Authorization for aircraft transit is the only weapon we have. Once the planes have passed through, we'll have nothing left in our hands if, by any chance, the Germans go back on their promises.

The Admiral replied that I was too Cartesian, that I had to act quickly and seize the opportunity before it was too late. I should have tempered his ardor at the time. Having failed to do so, I now had to fight against his discouragement. I told him that Mr. Hemmen was only a junior official, like those everywhere; that he was no doubt trying to show off in the eyes of his chiefs by gaining some advantage from the settlement of a question on which he had not been consulted; that, since May 5, we had been to Berchtesgaden, where we had spoken with the Chancellor himself; that we had to stick to what had been agreed "at the summit", etc., etc., adding that General Walter Warlimont had not been consulted, adding that General Walter Warlimont, the Führer's personal Chief of Staff<sup>1</sup>, would be arriving in Paris the same day to begin the negotiations arising from our talks at the Berghof. Wouldn't it be better to hear what he had to say, before breaking everything off?

- I'm afraid," I say in conclusion, "that if we send Warlimont back to Germany without further ado, the Führer will take this as

a new affront. After the one on December 13, we'll have nothing to look forward to.

The Admiral regained his composure and finally decided that it would be better not to give in to a mood that could have serious consequences for the country. But I could see that Mr. Hemmen's actions were still close to his heart.

The Paris conference opened at 11:30 a.m. on May 21, in the lounges of the German Embassy on Rue de Lille. Present on the French side were: Admiral Darlan, Vice-Chairman of the Council, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Interior and the Navy; General Huntziger, Minister of War; M. de Brinon, General Delegate of the Government in the Occupied Territories; Commissaire Général de La Monneraye; Capitaine de Fégate Fontaine; Commissaire de la Marine Fatou; Commandant Marty, in charge of drawing up the minutes, and myself.

Germany was represented by General Walter Warlimont, Wehrmachtführungsstab; Lieutenant-Colonel Westphal, I'O.K.W.; Commander Junge; Captain Boes and interpreter Grabowski.

These two groups were joined in subsequent sessions by, on the German side: Mr. Otto Abetz, German Ambassador to Paris, and Mr. Schleier, First Embassy Counselor. On the French side: Admiral Platon, Minister for the Colonies, Colonel Morlière, Commandant Chaix and Captain Roy. There were ten meetings in all, the last of which took place on the morning of May 28.

There's no need to go into the details of the negotiations here. Suffice it to say that they left me with the memory of an exhausting hand-to-hand struggle, all the more bitter as the discussions drew to a close. It wasn't a dialogue of the deaf, but a conversation of the blind. Nobody seemed to see - especially on the German side - that what was at stake was the future of France, the outcome of the war, the fate of Europe. I could see it clearly. But the members of the German delegation didn't seem to care. The future of France? They were indifferent. The outcome of the war? They took their victory for granted, and believed that nothing could deprive them of it. As for the fate of Europe, it would be exclusively what the Führer wanted; it was he - and he alone - who would decide sovereignly. So they paid scant

attention to our arguments, preoccupied as they were with obtaining from us every material advantage likely to speed up the success of their strategy, even if it meant granting us derisory concessions from time to time, which they threw at us like a bone to be gnawed on. I've never seen such vast and dramatic issues tackled with such a narrow and petty mindset. I often had to hold on to the table to keep my composure and avoid making an outburst. I was helped in this by three things: the Admiral's imperturbable calm; the fact that I kept in mind the objectives we were pursuing through this negotiation; and the acute awareness that a rupture had to be avoided, because of the harmful consequences that would inevitably follow.

I don't think it's possible for today's reader to imagine the desperate situation we found ourselves in in May, June and July 1941\*, which is why we need to keep coming back to it and underlining it.

Three major facts dominated all others:

1°) On September 3, 1939, we declared war on Germany. Whether or not we had valid reasons for doing so was irrelevant. Hitler's only concern was that we had declared war.

2°) By June 22, 1940, we had lost the war.

3°) Since then, 3/5 of France's territory has been occupied by the German army. Believing that a new phase of the war would wipe out this disaster was a wish that could only be made by isolated individuals. Not a government responsible for the nation's survival.

Germany didn't just occupy France. Allied with Italy, it held all of continental Europe in its hands, apart from Sweden, Spain and Portugal. But Sweden supplied it with all the raw materials it needed, especially iron. Italy claimed Savoy, Nice, Corsica, Tunisia and hegemony in the Mediterranean. It was counting on Germany to deliver. Spain, although not a belligerent, claimed the whole of Oranie and a significant increase in its sovereignty zone in Morocco. As for England, it was struggling with seemingly insurmountable difficulties. No help could come from anywhere.

The Reich, which had so far lost only 40,000 men, found itself at the head of 283 intact, formidably equipped divisions, a

powerful air force and a navy that was growing by one new submarine a day, enabling Hitler to say: "I never make a threat without knowing that military intervention can immediately follow it." This state of affairs presented us with a series of risks, spread out in space and staggered over time.

For the time being, we were subject to increasing demands from the Reich authorities, and we had to put up with them, whether we liked it or not, because the demands made by the German High Command were purely formal: if we refused, nothing could have prevented them from helping themselves, since most of these pledges were already in their hands.

It seemed impossible, sooner or later, that the Reich would not become increasingly aware of the strategic importance of the Mediterranean. If Hitler had his eyes fixed on other horizons, the same could not be said of Admiral Raeder or Mussolini. The latter, in particular, knew where he stood, and would not fail to draw the attention of the I.O.K.W. to this point, especially as the war was now spreading to the Balkans, Greece and Cyrenaica, where the Afrika Korps had just entered the campaign (February 12, 1941). The success of operations in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin depended to a large extent on shipping possibilities. German-Italian convoys from Palermo to Tripoli took 16 to 18 hours to reach their destination. In other words, it was impossible for them to make the entire journey by night. Part of the journey had to be made during the day, when troop and equipment transports were an easy target for British planes and submarines ambushed in Malta. On the other hand, the journey from Sicily to Bizerte took just six hours, which meant that the transports could be carried out entirely at night, even in midsummer, and considerably reduced the risk of torpedo attacks or air raids. It seemed unthinkable to us that the German and Italian naval authorities wouldn't notice. So we lived with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads: the armistice commissions in Wiesbaden and Turin banging their fists on the table, warning us to let German-Italian convoys pass through Bizerte and Tunisia, where the presence of a large Italian minority would have made their task much easier. Such a summons, catching us unprepared, would naturally have meant no compensation, and would probably have triggered a parallel

intervention by Spain in Morocco, had we pretended to oppose it. It was better to anticipate the event and try to derive maximum benefit from it, rather than passively suffer the disadvantages.

In the long term, there was nothing to prevent the Axis powers from regarding the 1940 armistices as mere holding positions that would put them in a position to crush us without remission, the day they achieved final victory. Given the balance of forces and the Wehrmacht's lightning advance in the Balkans, Greece and Cyrenaica, the date didn't seem too far off.

All these risks had been carefully assessed, bearing in mind that we couldn't expect any outside help, so the best way to protect ourselves was as follows:

- Negotiate with the Germans on their demands for passage through some of our African territories, to prevent them from taking on an ultimative character.

- Agree to grant them certain transit and material transport facilities, but strive to limit their scope and retain control over them.

- To insert ourselves, one way or another, into the new European order, to prevent the victors from disposing of us as they please, and to get them to treat us as partners and not as vanquished.

This "insertion into the new European order" in no way corresponded to a slavish alignment with National Socialism (it was up to us to find the structures in line with our history and temperament). But it did mean allowing French youth to join, on an equal footing, the German, Italian, Spanish, Belgian, Romanian, Hungarian, Scandinavian and Dutch youths, who were determined to play a decisive role in the reshaping of the continent, instead of remaining on the sidelines in morose passivity.

But as weak and helpless as we were, we didn't intend to achieve this at *any price*. We were both too proud and too aware of the value of our contribution (we even tended to overestimate it, but our position made it our duty). We were also aware of the risks we were running, as England, since the aggressions at Mers el-Kébir and Dakar, had not ceased to show its hostility to us. More recently, its aircraft had bombed Palmyra, Rayak, Beirut and Aleppo, while a formation of its torpedo boats had come under fire in the port of Sfax. So we were prepared to go down

this road only if three conditions were *met*:

- 1°) Rapid, massive rearmament of our African army;
- 2°) The abolition of all Italo-German control over the movements of our fleet;
- 3°) The modification of the armistice agreement and its replacement by new provisions containing the formal guarantee that neither Germany nor Italy would undermine either our overseas domain or the integrity of the national territory during the future peace treaty.

This policy had been the subject of lengthy conversations between the Marshal, Admiral Darlan, General Huntziger and myself. I can still hear Darlan saying in conclusion:

- If we do nothing, posterity will accuse us of having failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered to us, and of being responsible for crushing the country. And if, by any chance, the Axis lose the war - which seems highly unlikely, but we mustn't rule out any hypothesis - we will have done France no harm at all, since all the cards will have been redistributed and any measures we may have taken will be null and void.

I was therefore dismayed to see, during the discussions at the Paris conference, how the German delegation's approach differed from our own. General Warlimont and his deputies seemed to have been instructed to keep the discussions in the narrowest of ruts. No matter how much we drew their attention to the dangers we were exposing our African territories to, they were totally indifferent to these dangers. As "soldiers", as they kept repeating, they refused to get involved in the political and economic arena (whereas for us, political and economic factors were paramount). Finally, on the military front, while we demanded a massive reinforcement of our African army to enable it to defend itself against any aggression it might be subjected to, they would only grant us a few "top-ups" of manpower and equipment, distributed in dribs and drabs. The pettiness of their attitude was shocking. Considering what was at stake, what did we care about a few trucks? I remember one particularly laughable episode. When we asked for 500 motorcycles to reinforce the links between our various units stationed in North Africa, the Germans debated for two hours whether to grant us 75 or 80. Even then, they hardly demanded that we keep the number of headlights and spare parts at a lower level.

It soon became clear to me - and to Admiral Darlan - that we were heading down a blind alley. The problem as a whole was relegated to the background, if not deliberately ignored, while we were overwhelmed by a host of uninteresting details. The only way to put things right was to "cap" the three military protocols with a political protocol that would make their execution dependent on obtaining the broad political and economic concessions that were, in our eyes, the very reason for these negotiations. I explained this point of view to Admiral Darlan, who immediately rallied to it, considering it to be the only possible alternative for us, as an outright breakdown of the talks could have consequences as harmful as another December 13th.

With the agreement of the Vice-Chairman of the Council, I approached General Warlimont about this project, stressing that the signature of this additional protocol was a decisive condition for us, without which we would be obliged to postpone the continuation of the military talks to a later date. I thought he would react strongly. He did not:

- I have no problem with that," he replied, "but on one condition, because my instructions are quite clear: I'm not allowed to venture into the political arena. Consequently, I will not sign this protocol. It's up to you to obtain the signature of those who are concerned by these matters: I mean the German ambassador or the Reich foreign minister.

This was to send me back to Abetz and Ribbentrop, which was not to change my course of action. It was at this point that Abetz was invited to take part in the debates.

I had discussed this project with General Warlimont during a recess. I have to say that, despite the harsh way in which we confronted each other, the general - who was of Walloon origin and looked barely over thirty-five - was extremely sympathetic. We had an instinctive attraction for each other. In between conversations, I'd see him retire to a lounge adjacent to the conference room, where couriers would bring him bundles of dispatches, which he'd read with glittering eyes; then, bent over a large atlas, in the middle of the circle of his colleagues, he'd exchange passionate discussions with them. What was he telling them that was so interesting, and what did it have to do with the issues we were discussing?



I didn't dare ask him, and was hesitating to step through the door for reasons of discretion, when - it was May 27, if I'm not mistaken - he beckoned me forward and, taking me by the arm, led me to the table.

- Come, come," he said cheerfully, "you'll be interested!

I leaned over the table on which lay a large-scale map of... Crete! It was streaked with pencil strokes, dates and multicolored arrows indicating the progress of the troops currently busy taking over the island.

- It was I," says Warlimont, "who drew up the plans for this operation before leaving Berlin. It was particularly interesting because it was the first battle of this scale to be fought exclusively by paratroop units, notably the VI<sup>e</sup> airborne alpine infantry division. We played the mastery of the skies against the mastery of the seas.

- And how are these operations going?

- Even better than I'd hoped! I was a little worried at first, I admit, as it was the first time such an experiment had been attempted on such a large scale. But now I can breathe a sigh of relief. Chania, Herakleion and Retimo have already surrendered. Our troops are advancing rapidly to the south-east. As for the last English troops, they are fleeing in disarray towards the ports on the southern coast, taking refuge in Cyprus and Alexandria. A smaller version of Dunkirk. In two or three days' time, the island will be entirely ours.

As he said this, his brown eyes sparkled with excitement. Clearly, the conquest of Crete interested him far more than our dreary discussions. It awakened in him a youthful combativeness I didn't know he had. I could see in my mind's eye clusters of parachutists tumbling down the snowy slopes of Ida; I could imagine them continuing on their way through valleys filled with wild buttercups, and singing their way into Knossos, into the palace of Minos. O Ariadne, O Theseus! Every word, every look, every gesture of Warlimont's proclaimed that he would have preferred to breathe the pure air of the battlefield rather than the confined atmosphere of the salons of the Rue de Lille. And so would I! I said to myself: "How easy it would be for us to get along, if it weren't for all the obstacles, misunderstandings and taboos that stand between us like so many prohibitions!

On several occasions, I had to take the floor during the

conference to remind the German delegation that the granting of the "facilities" they were asking for was subject to the signing of the additional protocol, since Admiral Darlan had had to return to Vichy in a hurry, to face up to the outcry that was building up against him. For General Weygand, alarmed by who knows what tendentious rumors, had appeared on the banks of the Allier. After scaling the *Hôtel du Parc* staircase four by four, he burst into the Marshal's office, where he gave free rein to his raging temperament.

- What's this I hear?" he cried. Are we about to grant the Germans a right of passage through Bizerte? Tunisia is part of the domain entrusted to my care. I'm formally opposed to it! As long as I'm here, the Germans won't get through!

- What will you use to stop them?" retorted Darlan.

But Weygand was not deterred by so little.

- You know my policy," he continued. Armistice, nothing but armistice! There's nothing in the Rethondes Agreement that authorizes this passage! If you want to override it, I'll hand in my resignation and you'll manage without me!

Then Darlan exploded.

- For God's sake, it's not me who wants to override it! It's the German High Command!

"Armistice, nothing but armistice!" these words were easy to say. But how could our proconsul in Africa - of whom one of his colleagues at the Académie cruelly said: "He's a man more ambitious of situations than of action" - fail to see that clinging to the armistice was tantamount to standing still, head on the block until the axe fell? The Admiral had tried to bend him, arguing that he had been misinformed, that there was no question of letting the Germans pass through Tunisia, but only of granting them some transit facilities for their equipment. (The two men couldn't get along, and Darlan resented Weygand for making such a fuss at a time when he was conducting difficult negotiations). Finally, to calm him down, the Marshal authorized Foch's former Chief of Staff to come and express his point of view before the Council of Ministers. Admiral Darlan put his cards on the table:

- General," he said, "everyone here has to take responsibility. I took mine; now it's up to you to take yours. In exchange for the passage of a few trucks through Bizerte, do you know what I

demand? A rapid and massive rearmament of our African army, to enable it to resist any aggression, wherever it may come from, because any foreign power that settles in our African possessions will sever ties with the metropolis, and God knows when and in what state we'll find them again; then the formal guarantee that neither Germany nor Italy will raise any claims to our imperial domain in the future peace treaty, nor will they undermine the integrity of our metropolitan territory. Well ' I ask you: are you ready, General Weygand, to frustrate the country of these advantages? Are you ready to assume responsibility for the crushing of France and the dislocation of the Empire?

On hearing these words, General Weygand was stunned. The situation was so different from what he had imagined!

- Of course not," he grumbled through gritted teeth. But you won't get these advantages!

- Who do you think I am? I've taken my precautions. These guarantees will be included in a political protocol, which will be a prerequisite for the execution of the military protocols.

- What if the Germans don't follow political protocol?

- In this case, military protocols won't be carried out either.

- Are you committed to it?

- With honor!

- In that case, I have nothing more to say.

It had been a hard-fought battle. But it had ended well. The Council of Ministers approved the Admiral. As for General Weygand, he was able to return to Algiers, convinced that his intervention had not been in vain.

Afterwards, I often wondered how it was that this man covered in glory and morally irreproachable had such a narrow political horizon. His visceral Germanophobia

1. Admiral Darlan's report to the author. Some authors place this scene on June 3. But as the Paris Protocols had been signed on May 28, Weygand's intervention on June 3 would have been irrelevant.

and his fastidious legalism, combined with his need to cling to a reassuring conformism, went so far as to impede his freedom of judgment. No longer able to wage war with cannon fire, he waged it with pins, and the principles behind which he entrenched himself were less a stimulant than a cover. Was it because, although a wonderful chief of staff, he lacked the makings of a commander-in-chief? To think of the boldness of a

Foch or a Lyautey! For a long time, I attributed his irascible rigidity to the fear of what would happen to him if he strayed from the *status quo* (at least, that's how things had appeared to me when I suggested that he take a few easy-to-apply economic measures in North Africa, to create greater unity between Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, a suggestion he immediately dismissed, hiding behind the Treaty of Algeciras). But I was wrong. It was only much later that I deciphered this enigma, when a memore of his family revealed to me that he was literally obsessed by the mystery of his birth, and feared at every turn that he would be reproached for "not being French". It was for this reason that he had indignantly rejected Paul Reynaud's proposal in June 1940 to surrender militarily so that the government would not have to conclude the armistice. Me, capitulate in open country?" he cried, "they'll say I inflicted this shame on the French armies because I wasn't French! Not French, Weygand? None of his fellow countrymen would have had that idea. They'd long since forgotten his foreign origins - which, incidentally, were in no way dishonorable - and when they did think about it, it was to enhance his prestige and speak of an undeciphered halo of mystery. He, however, was always thinking about it, and this obsession paralyzed him. But back to Paris.

When the conversations resumed on May 27, they marked the start of a veritable marathon. Starting at 1 p.m., they continued almost uninterrupted until 3 a.m. the following day, May 28. We were exhausted. Discussions were at a standstill. As the hour wore on, military issues lost interest and political protocol took on greater importance. After all, wasn't everything going to depend on him?

Admiral Darlan asked me to draft the terms, and I retired with Abetz to a nearby salon. Then came the final sprint. At first, the ambassador refused to sign, claiming that he had not been authorized by Ribbentrop. Calling on my last remaining strength, I vigorously assured him that Admiral Darlan would certainly not sign the military protocols unless the political protocol was signed first, and that I myself would be the first to object.

- In that case," I tell him, "all our efforts since May 5th will have been in vain. But it won't be our fault. It will be because the Reich Government has refused to take our demands into consideration. It will mean that any negotiations with them are a

sham, that they simply want to squeeze us like a lemon. But then let him choose other interlocutors, because we're not prepared to go along with it. Pulling too hard on the rope will eventually break it.

"Admiral Darlan wanted to get everything out of the way before the Paris conference opened. He was exasperated by Mr. Hemmen's attitude, which went so far as to call into question concessions already won - the reduction of occupation costs to 15 million marks - and for which we had already provided the quid pro quo: the passage of German aircraft through Syria. The Admiral is right to find this obstruction intolerable. Don't push him too far

- It's true that Mr Hemmen's attitude is unacceptable...

- Tell me about it! Our backs are against the wall, we can't back down. Don't make things worse by refusing to sign the political protocol.

- I've already told you that I have no instructions on this subject!

- Well, ask for some!

I don't know if Abetz had ever thought I'd be a convenient interlocutor, but from that moment on, he had to stop thinking so. He put on a pained expression and sighed:

- How much easier things would have been before December 13!

Did he mean to say how much he missed Laval?

- Of course," I replied, "it's not me who will contradict you. I know that President Laval would have shown infinitely more diplomatic tact than I did. But I don't think he would have adopted a different attitude, because, despite all the resources of diplomacy, the facts are what count. Come on, Abetz! We're old friends. Even before we met, we wanted the same thing, from the day we almost perished under the bombs on that tragic Good Friday in 1918. Let's not set ourselves against each other: it won't do any good. On the contrary, let us prove that our respective oaths were not just words... Franco-German reconciliation is a great thing...

Abetz remained deep in thought for a moment. Then he said, in a dull voice:

- I'll phone Berlin.

He retreated to the switchboard to call Wilhelmstrasse. It took him several tries to get the Minister on the line, as it was nearly 3am. I don't know what they said to each other. But when Abetz returned to the office after a fifth call, which had lasted longer than the others, his face was more relaxed.

- It was hard," he tells me, "Ribbentrop wouldn't listen. In the end, he agreed with my arguments. He authorized me to sign.

The first round was won! All that remained was to draw up the text of the protocol.

In agreements of this kind, where you have to reconcile two divergent points of view, you never get one hundred percent of what you want. When I reread this text today, I must admit I'm disappointed. It pales in comparison with the efforts it cost and the hopes that were pinned on it... If it was written in the form in which it was, it's because I apparently couldn't get any more out of it.

Right from the start of the draft, I realized that our strongest argument was to point out the risks he posed to us, and these risks, it must be admitted, were not illusory. I pointed out to Abetz that R.A.F. squadrons had sprayed Syrian airfields with bombs (he already knew this); that the British were massing forces along the Euphrates; that the Turks were doing the same in the Adana region; that British torpedo boats had bombed Sfax. I informed him that the United States government had decided to stop sending any supplies to France, and that it had placed all our ships anchored in American ports under military guard (he didn't know this yet, and seemed impressed). I added that these expressions of hostility were probably not war, but that they could lead to it; that it was against this eventuality that we had to protect ourselves, and that we had to consider it in its global aspect, to compensate for it with concessions of the same nature.

In the end, not without some wrangling - for Abetz had to consult Ribbentrop on several occasions - we arrived at a text which clearly made the implementation of the military protocols "subject to the French government obtaining the military and political conditions implied by this situation". It ended with these words:

■ The German government will provide the French government, by means of political and economic concessions, with the means to justify to public opinion in its country the

possibility of an armed conflict with England and the United States."

That was the main point. This text, which was both an opening and a bulwark, gave us, among other advantages :

1°) The freedom to assess for ourselves the seriousness of the risks involved;

2°) The freedom to set our own volume of concessions to offset them, not just in our eyes, but in the eyes of French public opinion.

This gave us considerable room for manoeuvre - as the future would soon show.

After being submitted to both delegations for approval, the four protocols were signed on the morning of August 28 by Admiral Darlan and General Warlimont for the three military protocols, and by Admiral Darlan and Ambassador Abetz for the political protocol, in the grand Empire salon of the Hôtel de Beauharnais.

That same evening, the German ambassador hosted a reception for members of both delegations. Our delegation was joined by Admiral Platon, Minister of Colonies. General Warlimont did not attend, as he had immediately left for headquarters. On the German side, however, the meeting was attended by Field Marshal von Witzleben, General Heinrich von Stulpnagel, military commander in France, Colonel Speidel, General von Stulpnagel's Chief of Staff, and Colonel Hanesse, representing Field Marshal Goering.

Today, I can't look at the photos taken that evening without my heart sinking, for they dramatically illustrate the unpredictability of human destiny. It's like a reunion of spectres: Darlan, assassinated; Platon, murdered; Huntziger, killed in a plane crash; Brinon, shot; Witzleben, hanged for having taken part in the plot of July 20, 1944; Stulpnagel, dead after spending several years in Loos prison; Aetz, killed in a car accident after having been interned for a long time, also in Loos. What a massacre! I'm one of the few survivors, along with General Warlimont and Colonel Speidel, who since the war has been Commander-in-Chief of "Central Europe", on the staff of I'0.T.A.N. b It's a dream come true... This is the perfect time to reflect on Saadi's words, which inspired me to write these pages: "If you don't say these things yourself, who will say them for you?"

But let's stay in 1941. No sooner had the protocols been signed than I had to intervene in the financial discussions, where Mr. Hemmen continued to raise his voice. He persisted in demanding transferable currencies, and neither Jacques Barnaud, the head of our economic delegation, nor M. de Boisanger, Governor of the Banque de France, could get him to back down. It seemed as if his real aim was to throw everything away...

Then it was the turn of the prisoners of war, whose repatriation fell through. We had been promised the return of veterans of 14-18 and fathers of four children (and more). That was to be around 100,000 men. As I.O.K.W. had refused to release reserve officers, this figure had fallen to 33,600. I would have had to be everywhere at once, as the news from Syria was also worrying.

I pointed out to Admiral Darlan that I was working under deplorable conditions, that I had to fight at every opportunity, and that since the various ministries were dealing separately with the Germans on matters falling within their remit, the result was a lack of cohesion that didn't make my task any easier. So he decided to put me in charge of all the negotiations, setting up a "negotiating commission" and asking me to chair it. On June 3, he notified all the government ministers - Justice, Interior,

1. Rocquencourt S.H.A.P.E..

Foreign Affairs, Finance, War, Navy, Agriculture, Industrial Production and Labour, Aviation, Public Instruction and Youth, Communications, Colonies and Supply - inviting them to make themselves available to me by means of a text worded as follows:

*1 - I have decided to set up a commission to pursue, with the German civil and military authorities, the development of the conversations that took place between Chancellor Hitler and myself on May 10, 11 and 12, 1941.*

*2 - The negotiations will be led and coordinated by Mr. Benoist-Méchin, specially accredited for this purpose by the German authorities.*

*Mr Benoist-Méchin will be assisted by Mr Jacques Barnaud for all economic matters, and by Rear Admiral Marzin for all military matters.*

*3 - In Vichy, the commission will be supplemented by an office headed by Captain Fontaine.*



*4 - As often as necessary, Mr. Benoist-Méchin will convene meetings of the various Secretaries of State or Secretaries General present in Paris, to study with them the program and modalities of the various elements of the negotiations.*

*Signed: DARLAN.*

This note was sent to General Doyen, French delegate to the Wiesbaden Armistice Commission, to Admiral Duplat, French delegate to the Turin Armistice Commission, to M. de Brinon, Government Delegate General in the occupied territories, and to M. Bréart de Boisanger, Governor of the Banque de France. It empowered me to deal with all political, economic, financial and military issues that might arise between France and the Axis powers.

Subsequently, military affairs were split in two. Rear-Admiral Marzin, former commander of the *Richelieu*, became my deputy for naval matters, and General Juin for army matters. I hardly knew him, having met him only once, during an inspection visit to the Kônigstein fortress when I was head of the diplomatic delegation of prisoners of war. But General Huntziger had warmly recommended him to me.

- You don't know Juin, he said. He's a crack shot, one of the hopes of the French army. You're a young man. You have a long political career ahead of you. Me, I'm older, I could disappear any day now. Promise me you'll favor Juin's career. You won't be sorry.

As I was very fond of Huntziger, I gave him my word of honor. That's why I had General Juin's name included in the first military protocol, at the head of the 961 officers whose release we were requesting to replenish our African army. As I'0.K.W. had raised a few objections, I went back to Warlimont and eventually won the case.

As for Jacques Barnaud, obliged to shuttle constantly between Vichy and Wiesbaden, he couldn't be in Paris as often as I would have liked. Mr. Yves Bouthillier, Minister of Finance, decided to appoint Mr. Couve de Murville, who at the time was General Manager of the Mouvement des Fonds, as his deputy. (Couve de Murville never had the opportunity to take part in the

commission's work).

At last, I had a working tool adapted to the difficulties of my task: between the Anglo-Saxon attempts to dislocate the empire and the Italo-German appetites that threatened to crush the metropolis, I had to try to work out, step by step, the best possible peace treaty. What a long way I'd come since the day I left the Voves Frontstalag with only a bag and my leave of absence! I hadn't asked for it, nor even wished for it. It was the result of events. The magnitude of the responsibilities that had been heaped on my shoulders sometimes made me break out in a cold sweat. But I also felt, deep down inside, a profound, if unspoken, joy at the idea that I was going to help pull the country out of the abyss into which others had plunged it.

In the meantime, one day followed another, each bringing its own set of difficulties. Sometimes it was Mr. Hemmen who continued his acrobatics; sometimes it was the return of the prisoners that was called into question; sometimes it was our manpower replenishments that remained in abeyance, with l'O.K.W. showing obvious unwillingness. What was the meaning of all these obstructions, the total of which ended up representing an impassable wall? Was Hitler aware of all these vexatious procedures? It seemed unlikely to me. Whatever the case, it was impossible to go on like this.

On the strength of the Marshal's and the Fleet Admiral's approval, backed by the network of support I now had at my disposal, I went to the German Embassy on the morning of June 7th, determined to have a frank explanation with Abetz.

- The situation we find ourselves in causes me the gravest apprehensions," I tell him. We are in a state of confusion and ambiguity. What exactly does the Reich want? It's impossible to know, and until we do, we can't move forward.

The discussion quickly became tense. I reminded him of the Berchtesgaden meeting and how French problems had been sidestepped. How I now regretted my lack of audacity, my failure to put the essential questions directly to Hitler, overturning any preoccupation with convenience or protocol! If I hadn't done it in time, I'd have to start all over again...

- At present, I see only one solution: to spare Admiral Darlan and myself another meeting with Hitler. Let's cut the Gordian knot and get to the bottom of things! On May 11, we had the

misfortune to arrive at the Berghof the day after Rudolph Hess flew to England. I can understand why this turn of events captured Hitler's mind to such an extent that he was unable to apply his thoughts to anything else. Today, this reason for inattention can no longer be invoked.

- It will be difficult. Although the Hess affair had been digested, the Führer had other concerns...

- Which ones?

Abetz remained silent. (We were a fortnight away from the start of the Russian campaign, but he didn't know - as I did - or couldn't tell me).

- It doesn't matter! Whatever their degree of urgency or their nature, nothing is more important today than establishing Franco-German relations on a solid footing. The future of Europe depends on it. We can't go on like this in the dark, or we'll all end up in a new catastrophe.

- In the night, in the night!... I don't mind if our position isn't clear. But do you think yours is? You had it written into the political protocol that, before taking action, you needed Germany to make political and economic concessions to offset the risks posed by the growing hostility of England and America, and to justify these risks in the eyes of your public opinion... Do you think that's clear? When Ribbentrop saw this text, he slapped me on the wrist and asked me how I could have agreed to sign such a document! You're trying to hedge your bets on our side against the risks that England may pose to you. But do you think of what we, to whom you have declared war, can do to you if we lose patience and get angry? What do you really want? Tell us plainly!

I took a deep breath and answered calmly:

- What you would want yourself, if you were in my shoes.

- What do you mean by that?

- To erase, for my country, all the consequences of its defeat. To be assured that, once victorious, you will respect our integrity. To liberate our territory in stages. And that's it. All clear.

- It's clear, but it's huge! Do you think you can get it without doing anything in return? The Führer said "give and take".

- I haven't forgotten it.

- How far would you go?

- Far away. I'm no dreamer. In the world we live in, I know

that everything has to be paid for. When it's not with blood, it's with something else. But if that something else is enslavement, then I like blood even better.

- They're just words! It would be better to find another solution.

- That's why I'm here.

- Would you go so far as to reverse allLance?

I think for a moment.

- No, it's not. The word is unpleasant. And it's unworkable. By signing the armistice, the Marshal felt he was saving the country by pulling it out of the war. He would never agree to plunge it back into war. We have neither the desire nor the means. The people would never forgive us. After Dunkirk and Mers el-Kébir, it might have been possible. Today, it's too late. If it's true that people generally don't know what they want, they have a very sure instinct for what they don't want.

It was then that Abetz showed signs of impatience.

- Please, be reasonable! You're asking me to spare you and the Admiral another meeting with the Führer. How do you expect me to get it if I arrive empty-handed? In any case, I have to leave tomorrow for Berlin, where Ribbentrop has called me for a consultation. In the meantime, write me a note summarizing everything you've just told me. I'll submit it to him. But make it easy for me. Include a reference to the possibility of a reversal of alliance. Otherwise, I don't think he'll agree to see you.

- It's impossible for me to do this without the permission of the Admiral and the Marshall.

- I understand perfectly, but please hurry. I need your note by this evening.

I returned to Matignon to telephone the Admiral. I told him in detail about my conversation with Abetz.

- I'm on my way to the Marshall's to brief him," he replies. I'll call you back as soon as I get his opinion.

Half an hour later, the Admiral called me back.

- The Marshal agrees," he tells me, "on condition that you specify to the ambassador the exact scope and limitations of this commitment. Under no circumstances does the Marshal want France to take up arms again, unless it is in response to aggression.

I spent the afternoon writing my note and took it to rue de Lille

in the late evening.

- Here's your note," I said to Abetz. The terms have been approved by the Head of State and the Head of Government. You will find in it the allusion you wanted to the reversal of alliance. But I reserve the right, in a later note which I haven't had time to draft, to define precisely the meaning and scope we intend to give to these words.

Here's the note in question. Although it is a little long due to its summary nature, I felt it necessary to reproduce it in its entirety:

Paris, June 7, 1941. To His Excellency  
Ambassador Otto ABETZ Ambassador  
of Germany  
PARIS

*Mr. Ambassador,*

*I feel it is my duty to share with you, in all frankness, my serious thoughts on the current situation. Unforeseen complications have arisen in all fields and on all levels, and these together threaten to present a formidable obstacle to the action and policy of the French government. By practical necessity, our conversations lead us to examine one or other of these problems in turn. This fragmentary study of the situation must not cause us to lose sight of the whole, and that is why, confirming my conversation of this morning and fearing a crisis in the near future, I wish to communicate the following lines to you.*

*To get a better idea of how the situation is evolving, perhaps we should start with a brief retrospective.*

*On October 24, 1940, at Montoire, it had become clear to the French people that a policy of entente between France and Germany was possible, and that Chancellor Hitler was prepared to agree to it. The aim of this policy was to enable France, despite the defeat it had just suffered, to integrate honorably into the edifice of the new European order. This integration could only take the form of a gradual transition from the state of armistice to the state of peace, which was the only way to resolve a certain number of problems arising from the war and whose solution could not be found in the armistice contract. M. Laval had courageously embarked on this path, believing*

*that it was the only one capable of restoring France to its rightful place in the European community. From October 24 to December 13, the Reich government let M. Laval use his credibility with the nation, without providing him with any arguments likely to convince his compatriots. I don't need to go back over what happened...*

*during this period, which made his task all the more difficult.*

*The unfortunate events of December 13 put a temporary end to this policy. Since then, the accession of Admiral Darlan to the Vice-Presidency of the Council has enabled the French government to resume contact with the German authorities and to reaffirm by word and deed its determination to loyally pursue the policy defined at Montoire. And now, for a second time, circumstances beyond its control seem to make it impossible for the French government to follow the course it has set for itself. What exactly are these circumstances?*

*During the months of January, February and March 1941, the French government, wishing to demonstrate its goodwill towards Germany, agreed, outside the armistice contract, to supply Germany with a number of raw materials and manufactured items, including a considerable armament plan, the request for which had been forwarded by the German armistice commission in Wiesbaden. All these requests were approved, some in fact, others in principle, including the implementation of the armament plan. However, the French government pointed out that, as long as it was only a question of supplying raw materials, the solution to the problem had no political implications, but that as soon as an armament program was involved, for the execution of which the participation of hundreds of thousands of French workers became necessary, it was impossible for the ministries concerned to ensure such production without the political aspect of the problem being debated and resolved.*

*This was the situation on April 4, 1941, when you and I left for Berlin to put the question to the Reich Foreign Minister. A few days later, in Berlin, you told me that your conversations with Chancellor Hitler and Mr. von Ribbentrop were going well, a feeling which corroborated mine following my meetings with Mr. von Ribbentrop and Field Marshal Keitel. As possible concessions on the German side, you suggested that occupation costs could be reduced*

*from 20 to 15 million marks a day, that 80,000 to 100,000 prisoners could be returned, and that the demarcation line could be made more flexible. As for the problem of the attachment of the two northern départements, which was essential to the armament plan requested by Germany, you informed me that the question was still pending.*

*A few days later, the French government agreed to the delivery of several thousand trucks to the German expeditionary force in Cyrenaica. These trucks were located in North Africa. Their delivery to Germany represented a definite weakening of our economic potential in Africa, as well as a significant aid to Wehrmacht operations. In your own words, this new proof of goodwill made a most favorable impression on Germany's leading circles. Shortly afterwards, Chancellor Hitler sent word through you that he was prepared to receive the head of the French government. The future thus opened up with excellent prospects. The French government, confident of the Führer Chancellor's understanding, was all the more ready to embark on a policy of "cooperation".*

*The meeting between Admiral Darlan and the Führer Chancellor was postponed several times. In the meantime, there were incidents in Iraq. Invaded by British armed elements, the Iraqi government decided to join forces with England, and feeling its means insufficient, appealed to the Reich government for help. Although this attitude on the part of the Iraqi government had not been taken in agreement with the German government, and presented the latter with a series of extremely difficult problems, your government was anxious not to abandon a weaker adversary in distress. The Reich therefore turned to France for help in bringing relief to Iraq in the following form: German aircraft would be authorized to fly over Syria to Iraq. They would be granted landing rights at Syrian airfields, where they would be refueled before departing. Arms from the former French Army of the Orient, stored in Syria under the custody of Italian control commissions, would be destocked and 3/4 delivered to the Iraqi army, 1/4 being placed at the disposal of the French High Commissioner to reinforce his own means of defense.*

*The time seemed ripe for the French government to*

*openly raise the question of the concessions to be made by the German government in return for French aid to Reich enterprises. In a communiqué issued on May 7, a reduction in the daily occupation allowance was promised, the rate being reduced from 20 to 15 million marks per day (400 to 300 million francs). At the same time, the Reich government asked us to install a certain number of controllers in exchange for this reduction, which already distorted the debate since this reduction, in our mind, was the partial payment of previous acts already accomplished by us, not the counterpart of new concessions. The French government agreed to install controllers and, on the simple promise of an agreement to which other, more substantial political concessions were later to be added, immediately gave the necessary orders to the French High Commissioner in Syria to satisfy the German demands. Twenty-four hours later, the first German aircraft benefited from these measures. Three days later, the first arms shipments were in Iraqi hands.*

*It was at this point that the meeting between the Führer Chancellor and Admiral Darlan took place. The position taken by the Chancellor during these conversations can be summed up in the following formula:*

*"For any help France gives me in my struggle against England, whether this help be passive or active, I will grant France an equivalent concession. For small things I will give small things; for large things I will give large things. This sounds like an unpleasant haggle. I admit it, but I see it as a simple political precaution. Right now, you've made the first gesture, it's up to us to make the counterpart.*

*As soon as Admiral Darlan returned to France, it became clear that the Syrian operation had taken on infinitely greater importance than had been assumed at the time of the May 6 conversations. The British, warned of the presence of German aircraft on Syrian airfields, were successively bombing Palmyra, Rayak, Beirut and Aleppo, repeatedly causing casualties among troops and civilians alike. Meanwhile, the Turkish government adopted an increasingly threatening attitude towards France. England massed its troops on the Transjordan border. America decided to stop all supplies to France and to place an armed guard on our ships seized in its ports. By acceding to a German request, the whole of French policy was committed to a particularly*



*sensitive point in our empire.*

*Worried about the situation thus created, the French government addressed requests to the German government, insisting that the reinforcements needed to deal with the conflict in Syria be provided rapidly. At the same time, it insisted on the need for political concessions, the only way to justify the new direction of government action in the eyes of French public opinion. After some painful procrastination, you finally succeeded in obtaining the release of the veteran prisoners. The figure announced by the Oberkommando was around 80,000. An examination of the archives of the French War Ministry revealed that the figure was exactly 33,600, since the release of reserve officers had not been granted.*

*Given the slowness of the German armistice commission in Wiesbaden to approve French requests for reinforcements in Syria, and the threat of possible bombardment of our ports, General Warlimont came to Paris at your insistence. The French government believed that it would finally obtain from him the means to face up to the conflict in Syria and stand up to the British forces. Instead, General Warlimont confined himself to granting the bare minimum in arms and personnel for Syria, and linked not only the granting of these reinforcements, but also the return of the prisoners previously promised, to a number of new demands concerning Syria, North Africa and West Africa. I won't go back over these new demands, which are fresh in your minds and are enshrined in the three protocols signed on May 28.*

*Disappointed that the German government was maintaining such a reserved attitude towards Syria, anxious about the increasingly threatening development of the political situation, and surprised, as it made new commitments day after day, to see even the reduction in occupation costs agreed on May 6 put up for discussion, the French government agreed to sign the May 28 protocols only on condition that they be included in an additional protocol of a political nature, specifying that the execution of the said agreements could only be conceived within the framework of a political negotiation which would provide the French government with political and economic concessions likely to justify its action on the one hand, and the possibility of a conflict with Great*

*Britain on the other (these two things being linked) in the eyes of its public opinion.*

*A few days after the signing of these agreements, you left for Munich to speed up the granting of the envisaged concessions, while Admiral Darlan, responding to a new British aggression - the bombing of the port of Sfax - delivered a speech that irrevocably oriented his policy and drew up a public indictment of Great Britain. It was yet another step along the path he had set himself, and world opinion was not mistaken. We need only recall the reactions to his words from Messrs Eden and Churchill, Roosevelt and Cordell Hull. Since then, you have returned from Munich without making any decisions. What's more, with regard to the only concession really won so far - at the time of writing, not a single veteran has yet returned - i.e. in the area of occupation costs, Mr. Hemmen, the German government's representative for economic matters, is making such claims to grant the promised reduction that for the French government it would be tantamount not to a reduction but to an increase in occupation costs. As you know, this is the transfer clause. It would be better, on balance, to remain on the basis of 20 million RMarks.*

*To sum up, what situation do we find ourselves in today?*

*On the one hand, a series of measures taken by the French government and words spoken by Admiral Darlan, which resolutely commit France to a European policy; increased threats throughout the empire; greater tension between France and the United States; the possibility of a Franco-British conflict which could materialize any day now. But what do we see? The concessions envisaged as early as mid-April are still on hold, and the only one conceded on May 6 is being called into question. It is clear that the imbalance created between the importance of our concessions and the derisory nature of the quid pro quos must soon place the French government in a tragic situation.*

*Today, the French government has embarked on a course from which it can scarcely return, and at the more or less near end of which there is, as I have already pointed out on many occasions, the virtual certainty of a conflict with Great Britain, and perhaps also with America. On that day, what situation will France find itself in? At war with Germany, which has its prisoners, its collieries and*

sovereignty over 3/5 of metropolitan France, it will also be at war with England, itself at war with Germany. Such a situation cannot be justified politically, psychologically or legally. It would be without precedent in history, and would make it impossible for the French government to govern. Every time we examine one of the specific problems posed by the current situation - whether it concerns prisoners of war, the demarcation line, the northern departments, supplies, occupation costs, or the defense of the empire - it comes back to a more general point of view, that of peace. To solve this problem is to solve them all. To leave it unresolved is to resolve none of them. It is a problem whose solution depends exclusively on Chancellor Hitler and no one else. As long as he has not pronounced himself on the substance, all discussions of detail will be constantly rendered null and void by the pace of events. Today, France is trying to bring about what must be called a reversal of alliances. The French government has embraced these views because it believed that they were in line with those of the Reich government, and the only ones compatible with the country's higher interests. In fact, however, the German government seems reluctant to accept the indispensable corollaries of this new state of affairs, and leaves France dangerously in suspense between yesterday's unresolved conflict and tomorrow's conflict, which seems to be getting closer by the day. Hence the growing anguish of the French people and the strikes which have broken out among miners in the northern departments; these could at any moment lead the German authorities to use force, which would put an inevitable end to all our joint efforts.

*I repeat, it is now up to the Reich to decide, as the French government has already expressed its position through Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan. If Chancellor Hitler opts for a positive solution, it will be for France and the Empire to adhere to the policy of European reconstruction. It means France honorably associated with Germany for the common defense of the European vital space, i.e., more precisely, for the defense of its empire against any attempt at Anglo-Saxon aggression. It's an act of far-reaching political significance, but with immediate psychological repercussions. It is a lesson and an example for all*

*other European nations currently under German domination (Belgium, Holland, Norway, Romania, Serbia, Greece). It is also an act with incalculable repercussions for US policy, as it removes one of the major ideological reasons behind President Roosevelt's arguments: the need to go to war to liberate the enslaved peoples of Europe.*

*If the Reich government resolves the problem in the negative, or if it resolves it too late, the repercussions will be no less far-reaching. Suffice it to consider briefly the consequences of this decision as far as France is concerned. A new December 13th is not to be feared, as Admiral Darlan will be disavowed neither by the Marshal nor by his government, both of which are closely associated with his policy. He will be forced to relinquish power of his own accord, as he can no longer be held accountable to his conscience. On that day, Germany will have to take over the government of metropolitan France, following the methods currently used in Belgium. At the same time, however, the French Empire is likely to break away from metropolitan France, and not only remain neutral; it will immediately join the Anglo-Saxon camp. On that day, the British will have all their Atlantic and Mediterranean bases at their disposal, from Dakar to Gabès and from Egypt to Syria. On that day, too, the date of the United States' entry into the war will be considerably closer, and the outcome of the present conflict will be pushed back into the distant and uncertain future.*

*I know, Mr. Ambassador, that you are not indifferent to these arguments. I also know that these issues have been discussed many times in our recent meetings. But I wanted to give you these thoughts in writing before it was too late, if only to emphasize once again the urgency and gravity of the current situation, and to prevent it being said later that, having had the honor of being consulted by Admiral Darlan on the political line to be taken, I was not the only one to be consulted.*

1. This prediction was to come true, but only on November 8, 1942, seventeen months later and fifteen days after my departure from the government. While *I believe that my actions were in the best interests of my country, I may have contributed, on the contrary, to increasing the dangers for France, because I failed to appreciate the consequences of my actions in time. This*

*is also why I am taking the liberty of pointing out to you - so that your efforts and ours are not rendered futile in the short term - that I think it would be useful if a new meeting could take place as soon as possible between Admiral Darlan on the one hand, and Chancellor Hitler and M. de Ribbentrop on the other, in order to dispel the clouds that are gathering on the horizon.*

*Please accept, Mr. Ambassador, the assurances of my highest consideration.*

*The Secretary General of the  
Government Chairman of the  
Negotiating Commission.*

Abetz left for Germany the next day. There was nothing to do but wait.

June 11 brought me a pleasant surprise. It wasn't from Berlin, but from Vichy. I was in my office at the Hôtel Matignon, when Commandant Fontaine called me from *YHôtel du Parc* to inform me that the Marshal had just appointed me Secretary of State. For me, it was more than a promotion: it was an endorsement of my efforts. I immediately wrote a letter of thanks to the Head of State, in which I explained the spirit in which I intended to carry out my new duties.

*June 12, 1941.*

*Monsieur le Maréchal,*

*Allow me to express my sincere gratitude for the honor you have bestowed on me by elevating me to the rank of Secretary of State.*

*I see this as a vote of confidence, which I will do my utmost to justify, but also as a greater responsibility in the difficult negotiations I am pursuing on behalf of your government.*

*Ever since you called me to your side, I've been working day after day to lighten the burden of defeat and alleviate the fate of our unfortunate country.*

*Your thoughts and directives have never ceased to inspire me. Since you had given yourself to France, your colleagues were not allowed to give less than you. And, in moments of discouragement and weariness, I have*

*drawn stimulus and comfort from your example.*

*People may sometimes misunderstand the nature and meaning of my efforts. To follow the line of action defined by you and Admiral Darlan is not to practice a policy of fatalism and abandonment. On the contrary, it means asserting the right to fight relentlessly to free France from its shackles and provide it with the resources it needs to recover. It means helping to bring France from a state of war to a state of peace - that is, an honorable peace in which the political and moral renewal you envision can take place. Finally, it means devoting ourselves entirely to European reconstruction, which is not simply the result of our defeat, but the culmination of a long historical evolution.*

*All this is only made possible by your advice and your presence, and it's with dread that I sometimes think of what would happen if you weren't there to encourage and lead us.*

*So all my efforts will be directed towards this single goal: to ensure, however modestly, the stability and continuity of your work, so as to enable the Country to reach those new horizons that you have begun to define in your messages to the Nation.*

*Please accept, Sir, the assurances of my deepest respect.*

I was still waiting for Abetz's return and the Führer's reply to my note of June 7. But the ambassador was slow to return to Paris, and I had heard nothing from headquarters. So I waited for General Vogl's arrival in Paris. The chairman of the armistice commission in Wiesbaden wanted to speak to me urgently. I'd never met him before, but General Koeltz's\* description of him - who had to deal with him on an almost daily basis - led me to believe that the meeting would be a good one.

■ General Louis-Marie Koeltz (1884-1970). Director of armistice services until September 1941, he distinguished himself in 1943, in Tunisia, against the Axis forces. would not be pleasant. He had portrayed him as a brittle man, who took every word he said as a dictate, and couldn't bear the slightest contradiction. So it was with some trepidation that I went to the meeting on the morning of June 16.

The venue for our meeting was not the embassy, but the Hotel

*Majestic*, headquarters of the German military command in France. This too was significant. Either I was very much mistaken, or it meant that the Germans intended to dissociate military questions from political ones. Vogl's visit was the gendarme's intervention.

As soon as I entered, I was greeted by an orderly who, after the usual greetings, ushered me into a room with a horseshoe-shaped table covered with a green carpet. Ten German officers, strapped into their uniforms, were seated on the convex side of the table. Opposite them, on the concave side, was an empty chair intended for me. The whole thing looked less like a conference room than a courtroom. At the center of the group of officers was General Vogl. The gentlemen rose to their feet as I entered, while the general, without extending his hand, pointed to the chair. This icy welcome had the opposite effect on me to what my interlocutors had perhaps intended: it stiffened my resolve and cleared my head. When I was seated in my chair, in the midst of a crossfire of glances, General Vogl spoke:

- Mr. President," he told me, "I've come to Paris for a specific purpose: to request the immediate execution of protocol no. 1, concerning the passage of our equipment through Bizerte and its transport by rail from Bizerte to Gabès, where it will be taken over by our African armored corps.

That's what I thought. I stopped him with a gesture.

- I'm surprised by your request, Excellency," I replied. Until further notice, no German material will pass through Bizerte.

- What do you mean, no German equipment? You must be joking...

- Not at all, Excellency. Your request surprises me, but the fact that you know so little about the situation surprises me even more. No doubt the negotiations surrounding the signing of the protocol you are requesting have not been brought to your attention.

- What do you mean, you don't know? Outraged, he repeated, leaning towards his neighbor on the right, with whom he exchanged a few words. The latter began nervously looking through a file.

- You say, negotiations? *Verhandlungen*?

- Yes. *Verhandlungen*. With Mr. Von Ribbentrop through your

ambassador.

- Ach! Ribbentrop! I didn't know... How come?

- It's all right," I replied in a conciliatory tone, "we also have delays in transmissions... Let me explain.

General Vogl's eyes never left mine. I continued unhurriedly:

- Before signing the protocol to which you refer, Admiral Darlan and Ambassador Abetz initialled an agreement making its execution conditional on the French government obtaining political and economic concessions designed to offset the risks to which the protocol exposes us. These concessions are currently under discussion in Berlin. Until we receive the Führer's reply, it is absolutely impossible for us to give you satisfaction.

Just then, the general's neighbor took out a piece of paper from his file and handed it to the general. The latter read it carefully, frowning.

- *Ergänzungsprotokol*... Is this the document you're referring to?" he says, handing me the sheet.

I glanced at it and immediately recognized it. It was the German translation of the additional protocol.

- Yes, that's right.

- So I know him! There wasn't, as you said, a delay in transmission. But I see absolutely no connection...

- Therein lies the misunderstanding! The two documents are linked. You may say that the text - the *Wortlaut* - is somewhat ambiguous. Don't let that stop you. The text was written at 3 a.m., after fourteen hours of discussion, in a moment of great fatigue. But for Marshal Pétain, Admiral Darlan and, I would add, the entire French government, its content is unequivocal.

This is a point on which we will not compromise: no concessions, no transit. *Ich kahnn nicht anders* h

This unexpected reference to a phrase used by Luther at the Council of Worms brought a smile to the general's face.

- So how do you go about it?

- I don't know.

An embarrassed silence,

- What would you say if we proceeded as follows," suggested the general after a moment's reflection. Proceed with the study of the technical conditions of transit, so that execution can take place without delay, at the right time, but agree that actual



execution will be set at a later date?

I jump at the chance.

- Yes. Perhaps we could... That would be a good idea. Would you be so kind as to confirm this in writing?

We parted quickly, in a more relaxed atmosphere. I feared that one more word would make General Vogl reconsider his proposal.

The following day, June 17, General Vogl sent me the agreed letter from Wiesbaden. From it I extract these lines:

*Mr. Secretary of State,*

*As I had the honor of informing you in the course of our conversation, I have been instructed by the High Command of the German Wehrmacht to pursue with all possible speed the execution of the Paris Protocol of May 28, 1941. I would therefore like to ask you to let me know the earliest possible date on which negotiations can be pursued to send supplies through Tunisia to the German African Corps.*

*At the same time, I intend, on the occasion of this conversation, to discuss the question of using Dakar as a supply base for German submarines. I therefore ask you to summon the necessary French experts.*

*I would like to emphasize once again that the implementation of both agreements will be determined at a later date. However, the German Wehrmacht High Command attaches particular importance to all measures being taken to ensure that the agreements can be implemented without delay, and at the right time.*

1. "I can't help it."

I immediately forwarded it to Admiral Darlan, attaching this comment:

*I note that General Vogl confirms in this note the terms of our conversation during which it was agreed that the implementation of the measures previously studied would be set for a later date.*

Then I acknowledged receipt of his letter to General Vogl, inserting this passage:

*I would particularly like to thank you for confirming that these preliminary conversations were of a study nature, and that the date of entry into force of the two agreements would be set at a later date, in agreement with the French government.*

In fact, no German convoy passed through Bizerte; no German submarine settled in Dakar. Had the Reich government accepted our proposals, perhaps Rommel would have entered Alexandria. By the time Wehrmacht units arrived at the gates of Tunisia, it was too late: the situation had changed. It was the last days of December 1942. The Afrika Korps was retreating before Montgomery's forces. It was not coming down from the north, but up from the south and back towards Sicily.

In 1941, the events I described went unnoticed. I mention them today so that the Germans understand the cost of relying solely on force. And to let the French know how they were defended.



## CHAPTER VIII

### WHEN HISTORY ECHOES OR THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE ARMISTICE REQUEST

(June 17, 1941)

We had gradually reached the anniversary of the Armistice. So much had been achieved over the past year! Thanks to a relentless effort, pursued day after day in the face of ever-increasing difficulties, France was gradually emerging from the chaos. Most of the collapsed bridges were rebuilt. Railroads were running almost normally. Twelve million fugitives who had rushed south to escape the bombing had returned home. Over four hundred thousand prisoners were reunited with their families. A million hectares of new land had been put under cultivation, despite the absence of the most robust and hard-working part of our youth. Wheat supplies were assured until the next harvest. And more than that, a policy was taking shape, the principles of which the Head of State had defined in a series of messages. A presidential constitution was being drafted. Of course, there was no question of putting it into effect as long as the territory was occupied. But it was already possible to discern, if not the edifice itself, at least the broad outlines of what it would become.

On June 17, 1941, the Marshal gave a live radio address to remind the French people of their situation one year earlier, on June 17, 1940. He was to read the text in his office at the *Hôtel*

*du Parc*, and had expressed the wish to be alone, so as to be better able to reflect and not be disturbed by an unwelcome presence. But when he was about to leave his salon - where I had just made an urgent communication to him - he asked me, to my great surprise, to stay with him during his speech, thus allowing me to be the only witness to a scene that I have no hesitation in saying was unprecedented in our history.

The radio technicians had set up their microphones on the head of state's desk, connected to a truck parked at the entrance to the hotel by huge electric cables that criss-crossed the floor like a skein of snakes. The sound engineer signalled to the Marshall that everything was ready, and tiptoed off. A few seconds passed. Then the Marshall began to speak:

*- French!" he said in a firm voice, "a year ago today, I addressed my first appeal to France. The record that recorded it will spin before you. Hear it. It will put you back in the atmosphere of the day when that call was made.*

The Marshall fell silent. Then, from the radio at the other end of the room, came a distant voice that seemed to come from the depths of time:

*- Frenchmen!" she said, in response to the call from the President of the Republic, "I assume, as of today, the leadership of the Government of France. Confident of the trust of the entire people, I am giving France the gift of myself to alleviate her misfortune.*

*In these painful hours, I am thinking of the unfortunate refugees who, in extreme poverty, criss-cross our roads. I express my compassion and concern for them. It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today that we must stop fighting.*

*Last night, I asked our adversary if he was prepared to work with us to find ways of putting an end to hostilities.*

*May all the people of France rally around the government over which I preside during these difficult trials, silencing their anguish and*

*listening only to their faith in the destiny of their homeland.*

This message stirred up a multitude of memories that my recent activity had, so to speak, pushed to the back of my mind.

I revisited the grassy embankment where, with my feet bleeding and slumped over my haversack, I had watched the endless columns of a routed population march past me. The contrast between the despairing slowness of their advance and the expression of panic on their faces gave the spectacle a nightmarish quality.

Suddenly, a voice was heard from a nearby house, abandoned by its inhabitants. Through windows shattered by a torpedo explosion, it had uttered the words I had just heard:

*"It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today that we must stop fighting.... Last night I spoke to our adversary to ask him if he is ready to seek with us, as soldiers, after the fight and in honor, the means to put an end to hostilities..."*

A year had passed since that terrible day when - as an anonymous soldier - I too was launched onto the random roads. And now, as Secretary General of the government, I was standing in front of the man who had stopped the massacre and immobilized an entire people on the brink of the abyss. Even more astonishing: I could see him, sitting in front of his desk, silently listening to his own voice - the one I had heard myself twelve months earlier coming out of the hovel with the broken windows. At the time when the crowd had given free rein to their tears, I hadn't cried, because for many they were tears of relief, whereas what I felt as I clenched my fists was a mixture of commiseration, anger and shame. But in front of this old man listening to his own words with a humble, obedient air, I couldn't control my emotion. For Philippe Pétain, seated in front of the microphone, seemed to be receiving instructions from a man other than himself, from a predecessor whose terrible legacy he had inherited.

The record stopped. A few seconds of silence followed. Then the Marshall resumed:

*- That's what I said to you on June 17, 1940, in a voice*

*broken by emotion. Today, my voice is stronger, because France is rising again. But many French people refuse to acknowledge this. Do they really believe that their fate is more tragic than it was a year ago? French people, you really do have a short memory...*

*... You are suffering and you will suffer for a long time to come, because we have not finished paying for all our faults. The ordeal is hard.*

*Many good Français, among them peasants and workers, accept it with nobility. Today, they are helping me to bear my heavy burden.*

*But I need to do even better. I need your faith, the faith of your heart, the faith of your reason. I need your wisdom and your patience. You will only acquire them in the discipline I impose on you, from which only those who forget our history or oppose our unity seek to escape.*

*Above all, remember that you are men, the men of an old and glorious nation. Pull yourselves together, dispel your fears. Come to me with confidence. Together, we will emerge from the night into which this terrible adventure has plunged us.*

I watched the Marshal as he spoke these words. His face, his features, the intonations of his voice, everything about him was imbued with serenity. He radiated something unalterable. Unaffected by time, unaffected by age. With the exception of a slight deafness, he had passed through life without suffering any of the disgraces that existence is wont to inflict on the aged. His face would have seemed lifeless, had it not been for the candor of his blue eyes and the rosy tinge that flashed across his cheekbones to give warmth and life to what would otherwise have been the cold perfection of marble. His harmonious forehead and rounded nose were bent over the paper he was reading, just as he had once bent over the suffering of his soldiers. His hands, criss-crossed with large veins and dotted with freckles, looked as if they'd been made to hold the handle of a plough, rather than a marshal's baton. I'd seen him often, since the end of hostilities, but never had I observed him so closely. There was nothing about him that hinted at his warlord past other

than his khaki outfit, with seven stars shining on the sleeves, for if his hands had the calm robustness of a peasant, his face had the meditative gravity of a doctor examining a sick man's heart in the hope of perceiving signs of healing.

Was it the privilege of being alone with him, at a time when he was addressing forty million French people, that sharpened my powers of observation? In any case, I felt I understood him better at that moment when, stripped of any concern other than that of convincing, he gave himself up to me with disarming simplicity. Ah, I could see him! This great soldier, who wanted to be impenetrable, was far from insensitive, but he kept his sensitivity in a zone where it could not undermine the equanimity and self-control demanded by the exercise of command. Over the years, he had built up an inexhaustible reserve of terseness and impassivity. It was often said that he was marble-like, not to say inhuman. I could now see how wrong this was. Deep down, I could discern a contained shudder, a modesty that he feared nothing more than to let come to light. He was intimidating because he was shy and hid his deepest emotions behind a mask of majesty or irony. He shunned confidence and discouraged familiarity, not so much to keep his distance as to avoid compromising the delicate balance that served as the foundation of his authority.

And more! His detractors called him an ambitious old man. But what more could he want, who had reached the pinnacle of honors and could have spent the rest of his life "in the luminous idleness of glory"? All this he had gambled away in the face of the immensity of the disaster; he had thrown it into the balance at the risk of losing it, on the day when "he had given his person to France to alleviate her misfortune". The sacrifice was so great that many could not understand it. They attributed his accession to power to who knows what fraudulent reasons, from which self-sacrifice was always dismissed, but from which the most vile motives were not excluded. What misery! Why did they persist in not recognizing that only peril had brought him out of his silence, that only disaster had led this irreproachable army chief to assume the otherwise difficult role of leader of the people, at a time when the people seemed doomed to death?

Having finished his speech, the Marshall placed his hands on his table. He stared at me for a long time, without uttering a



word, as if seeking my approval. I didn't presume to believe he was looking at me. I knew he wasn't seeing me, that I was absent from his thoughts, that it was something else he was looking at through me: he was trying to perceive the Nation's reaction. But there was something so touching about the look in his astonishingly clear blue eyes that I felt a great surge of affection towards him, and would gladly have moved closer to him to express my gratitude, had I not known how much he hated effusiveness. So I remained motionless in my place and said to myself: "Patriarch, old patriarch, I too am giving you the gift of my person to help you endure your ordeal. My means are not great, but I give them all to you. And if you are ever unjust to me, I forgive you in advance, knowing that this too is part of misfortune."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE STATE OF TENSION

(July 15, 1941)

Although the operations in Syria had ended to our disadvantage, I felt they gave us the right to raise our voice.

General Dentz\*'s courageous defense had demonstrated not only our willingness to defend our empire against aggression, but our ability to do so, given the means. It showed that our fighting instinct was not dead.

The British aggression, which was unjustified since there were no German aircraft left in Syria, there was no question of bringing in more, and the Iraqi uprising had been totally liquidated, proved that the risks we were invoking when discussing the protocols were not a mere procedural device, and that identical aggressions could occur elsewhere.

Add to this the fact that, of the 35,000 men in our Army of the East, only 2,000 men and 70 officers had preferred to join the Free French rather than return to France. This indicated that the Marshal's France held undisputed power and exerted an infinitely greater attraction on people's minds.

■ General Henri Dentz (1881-1945), High Commissioner and Superior Commander of the Levant troops (Dec. 1940), he opposed the entry of British and Gaullist troops into Syria and Lebanon. Brought before the High Court on liberation. Sentenced to death, pardoned, he died in prison.

the Gaullist movement. It was a combination of political and military factors from which I was determined to derive maximum

benefit.

On June 7, I handed Ambassador Abetz a note listing all the difficulties we were facing and alluding to the possibility of "reversing the alliance". But at the same time, I reserved the right to specify in a supplementary note the meaning and limits we intended to give to these words. My mission in the East had made it impossible for me to write this note at the time, as I wanted to reflect on it carefully.

I devoted myself to this as soon as I returned from Turkey, concurrently with my negotiations on Indochina with the Japanese ambassador. Between July 10 and 14, I had a series of meetings with the Marshal and the Admiral, during which the essential provisions of this memorandum, to which we attached such great importance, were finalized.

The main features of this note were to be :

1°) To be as clear as possible, to put an end to the ambiguity of the additional protocol.

2°) To define and balance, with the utmost precision, all the benefits we felt we could legitimately derive from it, and the obligations we were prepared to undertake in exchange.

3°) To take account of certain remarks made by Hitler during the Berchtesgaden interview, namely:

a) That there were already a certain number of claims against France that he did not intend to raise in the peace treaty (northern departments, forbidden zones; integrity of our imperial domain);

b) That there were others, however, that he preferred to reserve for later and not submit for immediate discussion (Alsace-Lorraine; Tunisia; German West Africa; Togo; Cameroon).

After reworking the text several times, here is the version we came up with:

#### PREAMBLE

Although the French government has given the German government only insignificant military aid, it has nonetheless taken decisions and resolutions which have had serious consequences for France, without present events allowing it to foresee any compensatory concessions or satisfaction.

This is undoubtedly largely due to the fact that the method used to study Franco-German issues has become incompatible

with the development of the situation:

a) Because it's evolving faster than the point-by-point discussions of detailed accounting can;

b) Because it has become impossible to assess a priori the consequences of each of the French government's actions and, consequently, to proportion and harmonize the counterparts or compensations they imply.

The French government therefore believes that it is urgent to consider the new position in which events have placed France vis-à-vis the Axis powers, and to define the status corresponding to this position.

The following protocol sets out the French government's views on the principles that should govern this new status:

TRANSITIONAL PACT BETWEEN GERMANY,  
ITALY AND FRANCE (PUBLIC)  
(Project)

Article 1<sup>er</sup> :

The High Contracting Parties agree to re-establish peaceful relations between themselves based on mutual confidence and a mutual desire to cooperate in restoring peace and organizing Europe.

Article 2 :

Armistice agreements will be replaced by transitional agreements taking account of the new situation created by article 1<sup>er</sup>.

Article 3 :

Diplomatic and consular relations between Germany and Italy on the one hand, and France on the other, will be re-established.

Article 4 :

The present pact takes effect immediately and will remain in force until the signing of the peace treaty.

NON-PUBLIC PROTOCOL

(Project)  
PRELIMINARY DECLARATION  
OF THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT

Prior to the signature of this Protocol, the French Government, acting in full independence, makes the following declaration concerning the broad lines of its general policy:

1°) *In domestic matters*, the French government will pursue the National Revolution and institute a political order inspired by its national traditions and based on authoritarian and socialist power with a broad popular base.

2°) *In foreign affairs*, the French government will join with the German and Italian governments in all initiatives they take to restore peace and organize Europe.

3°) *In military matters*, the French government will immediately defend the territories under French sovereignty against any aggression. As and when the French material and moral forces are reconstituted, made possible by the substitution of an appropriate *modus vivendi* for the state of armistice, the French government will undertake the conquest of territories illegally occupied by British forces, the defense of imperial lines of communication and all defensive military actions likely to ensure the security of France and its empire.

4°) *In economic matters*, the French government will take the necessary measures to adapt its status to the new social order; to integrate its production into the framework of the European economy; and, renouncing liberalism and the customs compartmentalization which is its corollary, will participate in the trade flows of the continental community.

It is under cover of this declaration that the high contracting parties have agreed to the following provisions:

#### FRANCE'S ACCESSION TO THE TRIPARTITE PACT

##### Article 1<sup>er</sup>

At the request of the German and Italian governments, made in accordance with article 1<sup>er</sup> of the pact signed today, the French government undertakes to adhere, after the signing of the peace treaty, to the pact known as the "Tripartite Pact" and to assume from now on, subject to reciprocity, all its obligations towards Germany and Italy.

#### JOINT DECLARATION BY THE GERMAN AND ITALIAN GOVERNMENTS

##### Article 2.

The German and Italian governments take note of the above commitment and declaration of the French government and undertake not to present, during the discussion of the peace

treaty, any territorial claim on metropolitan France and on the extra-European countries placed under French sovereignty, with the exception of the former German colonies transferred to France in execution of the Treaty of Versailles, the following points being reserved:

1°) The Alsace-Lorraine question will be resolved by the peace treaty, so that this territory ceases to be the focus of a fratricidal struggle.

2°) With regard to the non-European countries under French sovereignty, certain adjustments designed in the general interest may be decided upon by the peace treaty, such adjustments not to impair the value of the French Empire in general or the unity or cohesion of the North African territories under French sovereignty in particular.

The present commitment is made by the German and Italian governments under the formal condition that France fulfills its commitments as defined in the present protocol.

#### CONCERTED ACTION BY THE THREE GOVERNMENTS

##### Article 3.

The German, Italian and French governments will consult each other as often as necessary to determine the details of any concerted action they may need to take.

#### REVIEW OF ARMISTICE CONDITIONS

##### Article 4.

The German Government, the Italian Government and the French Government agree to progressively replace the armistice regime by a regime based on both the sovereignty of the French State and the cooperation affirmed by Article 1<sup>er</sup> of the pact signed today and by Article 1<sup>er</sup> of the present protocol.

Successive provisional agreements to replace the armistice agreements will be proposed as soon as possible to the governments concerned by permanent commissions separate from the armistice commissions.

These provisional agreements will cover the following points in particular:

1°) The gradual restoration of freedom of movement and

communication.

2°) The immediate elimination of prohibited zones and the gradual elimination of the occupied zone, subject to the establishment of the special regime applicable to zones of operations and the status applicable to German troops called upon to transit, billet or stay in parts of the previously occupied zone.

3°) Absolute assimilation of the departments of Northern France to the other French departments and the establishment of a provisional administrative status applicable to Alsace-Lorraine.

4°) The practical exercise of French sovereignty in political matters in all territories under French sovereignty, taking into account military requirements.

5°) The gradual return of all prisoners of war.

6°) Authorization, within the limits and under the controls to be set, of the French rearmament required by paragraph 3 of the French government's prior declaration.

7°) Any economic agreement based on the principles of cooperation and equality.

8°) Gradual elimination of occupancy charges.

Article 5.

The present Protocol enters into force immediately: it will have the same duration as the Pact to which it is and will remain annexed.

It can only be made public by mutual agreement between the governments concerned.

When I reread this text, thirty years on, I remain convinced that if it had been submitted to the French people for a referendum in July 1941, they would have approved it by a very large majority.

I took it to the German embassy on the morning of July 14th. As Abetz was still absent, I handed it to Mr. Achenbach, Embassy Counselor, and asked him to forward it to the Reich Government as soon as possible.

Berlin's reaction was not long in coming. On the afternoon of the following day, Mr. Achenbach asked me to drop in on Rue de Lille.

- I regret to have to tell you," he said, "that the Führer Chancellor and Mr. von Ribbentrop were surprised and

displeased to learn of your note of July 14 and the draft attached to it. They see in it the rupture of the conversations initiated on May 5 and Admiral Darlan's refusal to pursue the policy defined at Berchtesgaden on May 11...

I almost cried out:

- But that's absurd! On the contrary, Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan saw the July 14th notes as the logical consequence and culmination of this policy!

But I preferred not to interrupt.

- Consequently," continued the advisor, "I am instructed to notify you that M. von Ribbentrop has decreed a state of tension between the Reich and French governments and the suspension of all Franco-German negotiations until further notice.

I expected the advisor to mention retaliatory measures. But he didn't.

- That's all I have to say," he added in conclusion.

- Is that really all?

- Yes, but I wonder if you fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation...

- Of course I do! But what can I do? I recognize that France has often been absent from history. But this time, it's Germany that's absent. It doesn't seem to appreciate the importance of the hour. May it not regret it one day!

- What do you want her to regret? From the Baltic to the Black Sea, her armies are victorious everywhere.

It was true.

On the Russian front, Army Group South had crossed the Dnieper; Army Group Central was approaching Smolensk; Army Group North was heading for Novgorod. In less than three weeks, the Wehrmacht had taken over a million prisoners. Never had German military strength been more impressive.

- And this is the moment you choose to put conditions on us? We're fighting for Europe. What are you fighting for?

- For *France's level of integration into the European community*," I replied, underlining every word.

Achenbach gave me an astonished look. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he added:

- Here, I'll tell you something confidentially that may interest you. Do you know what the Führer said when he saw your note?

- No.



- He frowned and said: "Mr Benoist-Méchin is very ambitious for his country!"

In other times, no appreciation could have flattered me more. But at this very moment, this sentence frightened me. If he thought I was too ambitious for France, wasn't it because the place he intended to reserve for her had nothing in common with the place I claimed for her? Exhilarated by his victories, he was already thinking out loud what he was to declare publicly a few months later:

- No one can blame me if, with regard to France, I take this view: keep what you've got! For he who relinquishes what he possesses is committing a fault, for he is abandoning what he conquered so painstakingly when he was the strongest on the continent\*.

I lowered my head. God, that defeat was heavy to bear!

- Too bad," I said to the advisor as I took my leave of him. I had hoped that Germany would seize the opportunity! I see that things are not yet ripe. We must be patient, patient, and not lose heart. But I'm afraid we still have a lot to suffer.

1. Declaration of May 8, 1942.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ADMIRALS' CONFERENCE

(1<sup>er</sup> August 1941)

On July 15, when Councillor Achenbach notified me of the "state of tension", I had expected this statement to be accompanied by retaliatory measures. This was not the case. I breathed a sigh of relief. But I wasn't reassured. It seemed impossible to me that this notification would be no more than a warning shot.

I was right to be on the alert. What happened next was not long in coming. But it didn't happen in Paris, where the political talks had broken down. It happened in Wiesbaden.

On July 24, General Vogl sent a note to Admiral Michelier, deputy head of our delegation to the German armistice commission in Wiesbaden, in which he said:

*"Mr. von Ribbentrop has read the notes of July 14 with dissatisfaction and declares that he cannot consider them as a basis for discussion.*

*"Mixing politics with the military, the French government is not fulfilling its commitments under the Paris protocols.*

*He no longer inspires confidence in the O.K. W. Under these conditions, the O.K. W. can no longer welcome the French government's demands for the repatriation of the Levant army, the reinforcement of forces in French North Africa, the rearmament of submarines in the Mediterranean, the reorganization of the French air force, and the reinforcement of territorial air defense.*

*"In addition, the favorable decisions already taken concerning the authorization of recruitment in the occupied zone<sup>1</sup> and the application of passenger control in the Mediterranean could be revoked."*

This memo was followed on July 29 by a meeting between Colonel Vignol and Colonel Bühme, during which it was also specified that :

- That no response would be made to current requests for the release of prisoners,*
- The same would apply to proposals for new regulations governing the granting of passes,*
- That there would be no increase in forces in North Africa, in particular by turning troops returning from the Levant into "reserve forces".*

On the same day, I had a fairly lengthy conversation with Councillor Achenbach, in an attempt to find out how far the tightening of the tension would go.

Dr. Ernst Achenbach, today a member of the Bundestag of the

Federal Republic of Germany, was a very fine mind and, above all, much clearer than Abetz. He would often say unpleasant things to you with a charming smile, but every one of his words was worth remembering because they were realistic and devoid of sentimentality. Moreover, he was not a Nazi, but, by temperament and reason, a democrat and a liberal.

- I don't underestimate the importance of Keitel's and Ribbentrop's reactions," I told him. But the most important thing for me would be to know the Chancellor's position.

- The Chancellor's position? I can sum it up for you in a few words. Here's what he thinks:

« 1°) All the arguments raised by the French government are only pretexts to mask its bad faith;

« 2°) His reticence stems from his belief that I will not emerge victorious from the Russian campaign;

« 3°) Either the Admiral keeps his promises to help me, by allowing the Rommel army to be supplied, or he does not;

« 4°) I didn't *refuse* to make political concessions, I said I'd discuss them *later*;

« 5°) Since France insists on discussing them right away, she's trying to put pressure on me,

« Either because she thinks I'm in dire need of Bizerte,

« Either because she thinks I'm in a weaker position than before.

"In either case, I can't give in to this pressure.

Achenbach added: "Moreover, Germany does not wish to settle its accounts with Italy for the time being, given the latter's difficult position. The concessions demanded by France would first require the Reich to take a stand on Italian claims. Italy, worried, exerted increased pressure on the Reich to maintain its claims, which it felt threatened by a possible Franco-German rapprochement.

In short, this was the reaction Ciano and Mussolini had already had in 1938, when Hitler wanted to return the ashes of the King of Rome. This time, however, it took place in a much more dramatic context.

Two points in Achenbach's statement particularly caught my attention: the first concerned a possible Wehrmacht defeat in Russia. At the time, there was nothing to suggest this. Not only was the German army advancing rapidly eastwards, capturing

ever-greater numbers of guns, equipment and prisoners, but during my time in Ankara\*, I had learned of the vast naval air operations in the Mediterranean and the East that Hitler was preparing "for the moment when Russia would be definitively put out of action", which in his eyes would happen before the onset of winter.

The second was Bizerte. Yes, Germany and Italy needed Bizerte badly! They didn't believe it - or pretended not to. But the time would come when they would have to admit it. It seemed impossible - to Admiral Darlan and to me - that it could be otherwise. That was when the decisive game would be played...

In the meantime, we had to make do without abandoning our fundamental positions.

On August 1<sup>er</sup>, Admiral Darlan summoned Admiral Michelier, Admiral Duplat, head of our delegation to the Italian armistice commission in Turin, and myself to Vichy. He asked each of us to give him a report on the situation, without consulting us beforehand, so that we could compare our observations. I'll summarize them for the sake of brevity. I said:

*"From the various conversations I've had in Paris over the last few days, I'm convinced that the Reich has decided to use every means of coercion in its power to ensure that the Bizerte protocol is carried out. There will no doubt be no spectacular gestures, but a series of measures leading to a kind of asphyxiation of the French government with regard to all our demands - reinforcements from Africa, the Levant army, occupation costs, prisoners, levies, the demarcation line - accompanied by a violent campaign in the press of the occupied zone aimed at blaming the French government for the situation.*

*"The breakdown in Franco-German conversations is accompanied by much more active conversations with Italy and Spain (I got this last fact from M. de Lequeirica, Spanish ambassador in Vichy). These two countries saw*

*their position towards Germany grow as France lost ground. There is talk of German troops having the right of passage through Spain to Spanish Morocco, in order to neutralize Gibraltar and carry out offensives.*

*through North Africa, or southwards towards Dakar (Raeder plan).*

Admiral Michelier wrote:

*"On July 31, 1941, tension reached its peak; the situation was worse than at any time since the armistice had been signed.... An atmosphere of ultimatum reigns in Wiesbaden. All our requests for reinforcement have been categorically refused, and a whole series of new measures are imperiously demanded.*

*"General Vogl continues to demand that France radically dissociate military problems from political ones, on pain of seriously poisoning Franco-German relations, and this on a higher level than the armistice commission.*

Even more interesting was Admiral Duplat's report. It marked the entry into the fray of Italy, whose previous defeats in Eritrea, Cyrenaica and Greece had forced it to adopt a cautious reserve. He wrote:

*"Since the start of hostilities between Germany and Russia, the Italian press has once again begun to expose its claims on France... The dispatch of a few Italian divisions to the Russian front and some naval air successes in the Mediterranean have helped to make Italy believe that its position as a poor second to Germany is definitely improving. Italy believes that, instead of being a dead weight for Germany, it has become useful, not to say necessary.*

*"By listing the services rendered and to be rendered, Italy fully justifies its traditional claims, particularly those concerning Tunisia.*

*"General Vacca-Maggiolini, President of the Italian Armistice Commission, has warned me of a possible sanction, which could well be territorial. Tunisia is very likely to be included in this threat.*

*"On the other hand, we fear a resumption of hostilities in Cyrenaica in September, with England this time operating with powerful means. We must therefore guard against this attack by putting pressure on Germany for rapid aid, to which transit via Tunisia is linked. Italy is therefore currently lobbying Germany to :*

*"On the one hand, we make France yield;*

*"On the other hand, the French farces in North Africa were not increased, in particular by constituting the troops returning from the Levant as "reserve forces";*

*"Germany, now in relative need of Italian aid in the Mediterranean, does not want, at this time, to take a position towards Italy in the problem of its claims against France.*

*"This is yet another reason why Germany is currently refusing to meet our demands for political quid pro quos.*

The three reports overlapped exactly: slow asphyxiation in Paris; risks over Morocco; threats over Tunisia; German desire to separate military from political; reactivation of Italian claims; Hitler's reluctance to arbitrate in our favor the territorial problems pitting us against Mussolini - all these factors created a most difficult situation, which I discussed at length with Admiral Darlan and the Marshal. They had approved the terms of my notes of July 14th. Now they seemed somewhat frightened by the scale of the German and Italian reactions.

- We're back where we were the day after December 13th," observed the Marshal, a little wistfully.

- The day after December 13," I told him, "we were threatened with asphyxiation as a result of an error of judgment that's hard to justify. If we are threatened today, it's because we took a position that everything justifies. For my part, I am prepared to collaborate loyally with Germany, but not at the price of mutilating or enslaving France. I think, Monsieur le Maréchal, that you share my point of view. It would have been better to make this clear and get away from the ambiguity of the additional protocol. If I cling to this position - and I won't deviate from it - it's because I'm convinced that any mutilation of our national territory, any limitation of our sovereignty, would bring

with it the dawn of new conflicts. To avoid this, we have not only *linked* the military to politics: we have *subordinated* the former to the latter. We must not dissociate the two, as General Vogl urges us to do. Let's stand firm on our positions: it's the only way to preserve our strengths. And then, there's another element that seems rather positive to me: the entry of Italy. This will transform the Franco-German dialogue, to which we were bound by necessity, into a three-way conversation. This may make negotiations more difficult, but it broadens the horizon, multiplies the number of possible combinations, and prevents us from falling under the thumb of a single interlocutor.

Finally, I explained that when Councillor Achenbach had informed me of the "state of tension", I had not thought it necessary to change my position. I had simply expressed my disappointment that the Reich did not seem aware of the constructive nature of our proposals, and concluded our conversation with these words: "The matter is not ripe. We'll just have to wait and see. Perhaps by then we'd have a lot to suffer. But as far as we were concerned, it didn't matter: we had long since made the sacrifice. The main thing was that the nation should not suffer too much in the meantime. I ended with these words:

- I'm sure that, sooner or later, Germany and Italy will understand our position. Now, if you feel it would be better to proceed otherwise, I await your instructions.

After a brief debate, the Marshal and the Admiral agreed that there was nothing else to be done, and that "there was no need to succeed in order to persevere".

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## CHAPTER XI

### ONE HUNDRED PER ONE

(August 21-25, 1941)

Late afternoon on August 21, Jean Lombard, my chief of staff, informed me that a Kriegsmarine midshipman named Moser had been shot dead by an unknown assailant at the Barbes metro station. According to the Prefecture de Police, the young man was standing among the other passengers when he was stabbed in the back as the train entered the station. Once he had done so, the murderer got out of the carriage and lost himself in the crowd. While I deplore the victim's fate, I'm not overly moved by it, believing it to be no more than a simple news item.

It was only the next morning that I realized the full significance of the event - and the extent of my error. During the night, the German military high command had put up posters on the walls of Paris. They informed the population that hostages would be shot if the perpetrator was not found within forty-eight hours.

- How much?" I asked Lombard.
- The poster doesn't say.
- Find out more at the Kommandantur.



After a moment, Lombard returns to my office. His face is defeated.

- A hundred!" he said laconically.

- A hundred men for one!" I exclaimed, walking up and down my office at Hôtel Matignon. These gentlemen are going a bit too far! When a foreign army occupies a territory that isn't its own, attacks are always carried out against its members. It's almost inevitable. Why make a big deal of it?

But deep down inside, I sense that this is not the tragedy. In my stubborn pursuit of the single goal of defining peace, I've almost forgotten that war is only dormant. It has suddenly awakened. And what a war it is. A war of religion, with antagonistic ideologies fighting to the death. It's one of those tragic situations where those who seek to make reason heard have little chance of gaining the upper hand, because they are not fighting on equal terms with those whose whole effort consists in unleashing passions. Until now, France had remained calm. But since the German divisions entered Russia, there has been a symptomatic effervescence in certain sectors of the population. Is this the harbinger of a new confrontation? On top of all the misery we're already suffering, are we going to have to endure a kind of civil war under the watchful eye of the occupier? Assuming he doesn't get involved!

While Jean Lombard and I are examining the possible consequences of the affair, my telephone rings. It's Admiral Darlan calling from Vichy. At first, I don't recognize his voice. This is probably due to the connection, which is poor.

- You've heard the news, I suppose? he said.

- The hostage posters?

- Yes. It's inadmissible. Go and see General von Stulpnagel immediately. Offer him my condolences for the death of Aspirant Moser, but tell him that I am formally opposed to the execution of the hostages. How can I continue to lead the government if French blood is being spilled? We're going to get out of the armistice status, and I'm going to have to revise all my political positions. Above all, don't waste any time. The deadline is very short. I don't want to find myself faced with a *fait accompli*.

He hangs up without even giving me time to ask him anything more.

Protest to General von Stulpnagel? I don't think such a course of action is likely to succeed. The military commander in France

is a rigid man, with whom I've not been on the best of terms since the export license affair.

But Abetz was absent, perhaps in semi-disgrace, for having agreed to sign the additional protocol. He was recalled to Berlin and has not returned. This shows a determination to leave us face-to-face with the military. What's more, all political dialogue with the embassy has been suspended since July 15, when Councillor Achenbach notified me of the "state of tension". What an unfortunate combination of circumstances!

Lombard, to whom I repeated the Admiral's words, gestured with his hand as if he wanted to ask me a question.

- I'm listening," I said.

- How is it that the Admiral has entrusted you with this mission? You're neither the Prefect of Police nor the Minister of the Interior. The murder took place in an occupied zone. The matter falls more appropriately to M. de Brinon. Finally, wouldn't it be better for a delegation to visit the general? Just think of the responsibility you'll be taking on if you go alone, and the reproaches you'll face if you fail! Not to mention the remorse you'll feel if...

I'll stop him. He's right! I can't bear the thought that a hundred people might have died because I didn't plead their case properly! I'm about to call the Admiral back in Vichy to urge him to relieve me of this task when my phone rings again. This time it's M. du Moulin de Labarthète. The head of the Head of State's civil cabinet is calling me from the *Hôtel du Parc*.

- The Marechal is upset," he tells me. This affair reminds him of the repression of the mutinies in 1917. He's asking you to do the impossible to avoid the worst. What are you saying? I can hardly hear you.

- I say it would be preferable to have this done by a delegation.

- I'll see what he thinks.

Silence.

- No, I'm afraid not. The Marshal insists that it should be you. He thinks you're the best person to talk to them. If, by some misfortune, you don't succeed in getting the decision reported, you should know that he intends to appear in full regalia at the demarcation line to hand himself over as a hostage to the Germans, in place of the hundred prisoners they intend to shoot. Can you imagine the consequences? France deprived of a leader as well as a government, because no one would want to exercise

power in his absence... So do your best. We wish you all the best!

I'm appalled. Why do I have to be the one to deal with this? I joined the government to free my comrades from captivity, and now I'm in charge of making sure that the head of state doesn't take himself prisoner... I would never have believed that such a task could fall to me!

The nobility of the gesture certainly impresses me. Especially from a man of eighty-five. I know the Maréchal well enough to know what inspires him. "I have given myself to France..." He thought this was the moment to prove it to the French people in more than just words. Yet something bothers me about this initiative. It seems ill-considered. Does a head of state have the right to act in this way? Can he freely dispose of himself, when he is in charge not of a hundred, but of forty million French people?

No matter how many times I turn these thoughts over in my head, one thing is clear: I'm going to have to go to the *Majestic* Hotel. I don't want to leave anything to chance, so I call the Prefect of Police first.

When Admiral Bard enters my office, I immediately ask him the essential question:

- What are the chances of finding the perpetrator within the next forty-eight hours?

- None at all.

The prefect is adamant.

- Maybe we'll get our hands on him in three months, a year from now, in another random case. But that's not certain.

He then explains this to me, which I hadn't thought of:

- In a common crime, it's much easier to find the culprit because there's almost always a link, however tenuous, between the murderer and the victim. Not so with political crimes. Aspirant Moser's killer may have been parachuted in from London. In that case, a plane may have come to pick him up, and he may no longer even be in France.

- So you don't think there's any chance of finding him?

- I've already told you: not one chance in a thousand.

When the Prefect left, I suddenly felt very alone. As alone as the day I went to see General Vogl to tell him that no German supplies would pass through Bizerte. But today, it's much worse, because it's not just a matter of material transit: the lives of a hundred living beings depend on me. I can't avoid it, and I can't

put it off any longer. Minutes pass. The fatal deadline is approaching.

Jean Lombard telephones the German military command to find out when the general will be able to see me. A voice replies that the general isn't in, and that we don't know when he'll be back in his office. Annoyed, I pick up the receiver myself and insist with all my might:

- Tell the General that I absolutely must see him as soon as possible. What I have to tell him is of the utmost importance. I'm ready to meet him anywhere, at any time of the day or night.

The person on the other end of the line seems to hesitate. I can guess what's going on: General von Stulpnagel knows exactly what's provoking my approach. But he'd rather not have a painful discussion. Finally, the voice says:

- The general apologizes. He's very busy...

Will he deny me a hearing until the deadline has passed?

Suddenly the voice adds:

- In any case, he wouldn't be able to see you before 4am.

Does he think he can discourage me by fixing such an early hour? I leap at this tenuous hope.

- Please thank the General. I'll be at his office at 4 a.m.

- It's just that...

I hang up immediately, for fear of hearing the voice take back what it has just told me.

\*

I look at my watch: it's nearly 7pm. Nine hours to go! I wonder if the hostages have been designated. And if so, have they been informed of their fate yet? It's terrible to die when you're innocent. A miscarriage of justice is monstrous in itself, but this time it wasn't a mistake. Nobody disputes their innocence. No one claims that they participated in the murder of the aspirant. It was blind chance that singled them out for the post. What bad luck! They must have been born with the wrong number.

- Take a seat for a moment," says Lombard, approaching a chair.

- Why?

- You're very pale.

- And wouldn't you be, if you were in my shoes?

He raises his arms in helplessness and doesn't answer. Then,

after a few seconds, as if to take my mind off things:

- Don't forget that you're due to attend the dinner organized by the German Cultural Institute in 1 honor of Mrs. Ina Seidel.

That's right! I'd completely forgotten. I'm going to apologize. Until the hostage crisis is over, I feel incapable of thinking about anything else. I keep looking at my watch. With every minute that passes, I say to myself, "One less!" I don't know what I want more: to delay the movement of the hands or to speed it up.

Lombard points out that dinner is at 8 and that it's too late to cancel. He's right. I'd better go, or God knows how my absence will be interpreted! But acting as if nothing had happened, smiling, looking good, seems to me an additional and undeserved hardship.

When I arrive at the Palais d'Orsay, the guests are already there. Dr. Karl Epting, director of the German Cultural Institute, introduces me to the famous novelist and briefly comments on the importance of her work. I look at her beautiful face and large, expressive eyes, a little sunken in their sockets. At last, something human. I try to be friendly, but without much success, as I feel like a patient about to undergo surgery who is beginning to feel the effects of the anaesthetic. We sit down to dinner. Although Ina Seidel is seated opposite me, her face seems to be drowned in mist. As I swallow my first mouthful of consommé, my stomach clenches. I'd better abstain.

- What's the matter?" asks Nicole Bordeaux, a friend of Suzanne Abetz. Don't you look well?

At any time, that thought would have made me smile. But not today.

- Me? Not in the least...

I say these words so roguishly that I'm embarrassed myself. Everything hurts: the flowers, the bright light, a few bursts of laughter. I want to pull the tablecloth to me, spill all the dishes and shout: "Shut up! Don't you know that this evening is a wake?"

As soon as the meal is over, I quickly slip away.

Arriving at the Hôtel Matignon, I open the French window of my office and take a deep breath. The air in the park is permeated with the smell of wet foliage. Midnight strikes at Sainte-Clotilde. Four hours to go! I ask the security guard on night duty to let me know when it's a quarter to four. Then I switch off the light and lie down on a sofa. If only I could sleep! But there's a large Louis

XV cartel on the mantelpiece whose regular ticking inflicts me with a torment comparable to that of a water droplet. I get up, grumbling, to stop the pendulum. But no: it's too risky. What if the security guard forgets to wake me up and I miss my appointment? I start the pendulum again. You mustn't sleep...

I must have dozed off anyway, because the security guard woke me up. Quarter to four! It's still dark, but it's time to set off on the most arduous negotiation of my life.

\*

At the Hotel *Majestic*, General von Stulpnagel receives me in his office. He looks serious and seems to me to be leaning back in his armchair.

- I know what you've come to tell me," he says at the outset. It's about the hostages.

I nod.

- It's useless," he continues. Anything you can tell me won't make any difference. I'm a Prussian officer. I've got my orders. I have to carry them out. I'm not happy about it. But I don't have to discuss them.

I watch him carefully. He's much less dashing than when we last met.

- Excellency," I said, weighing up every word, "I'm not here to ask you to disregard your instructions. Since you have received them, you must apply them.

He raises his head and looks at me in surprise.

- I can see that you understand my situation. I thank you for that. I wasn't consulted. Otherwise...

I had lost all hope. Hearing those last words, I began to hope again.

- I simply wish to inform you of two facts that I feel duty-bound to bring to your attention.

I pause for a moment. Then I continue:

- I made inquiries with the Prefect of Police. He told me that there was no chance of the murderer being arrested within the prescribed timeframe.

- What's up?

The general punctuates this word with a significant gesture.

- Then, within forty-eight hours, you'll see Marshal Philippe

Pétain of France in full regalia at the demarcation line.

The general is startled.

- The what? The Marshall? You've got to be kidding...

- Not at all!

He runs a hand over his forehead.

- He will present himself at the Moulins checkpoint to take your prisoner in place of the hundred hostages you are preparing to shoot. Instead of a hundred unfortunates that nobody knows, you'll have to shoot the winner of Verdun.

- But, but," stammered the general, "this is a crazy situation!

- Mind you, Excellency, I don't think you'll shoot the Marshal. But once you have him in your hands, you'll still be in a very awkward position. All the more so because if - against all odds - you go ahead with your plan, the Admiral will resign as vice-president of the Council and make a statement that I don't think is likely to keep the country calm. It will then be up to you to decide.

The general stiffened perceptibly.

- I knew you'd come to tell me terrible things! But I find all this so disturbing that I find it hard to believe you.

- Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan have instructed me to bring these two facts to your attention. I do so on their behalf. Now, if you don't believe me, all you have to do is wait: you'll be obliged to believe me.

The general stood up and paced his office. He obviously hadn't expected this turn of events.

- What to do? What to do?" he repeats. I've received irrevocable orders. I must carry them out. I don't suppose you expect me to disobey?

- It wouldn't even occur to me.

- Or that I give in to the threat?

The tension is at its height. But it's precisely this tension that's causing an idea to ripen in my brain, one that occurred to me last night, just in case there was no other way out.

- There may be a way...

- Which one?

- Here we are. You received formal instructions? But between the time you received them and the time you put them into effect, something new happened: my visit. I've officially informed you of the Marshal's and the Admiral's intentions. This is important,

because it could have incalculable consequences. Do you think that if you carry out your instructions without first referring to your Führer, he won't be extremely displeased? Do you think he won't reproach you for it? Mind you, I'm not asking you to break any rules. I'm simply suggesting that you inform the Chancellor of my visit; let him know what I've just told you. And then *ask him to confirm his orders*.

The general's face lights up.

- Of course, of course... That would be an idea ' Asking for confirmation of an order before executing it cannot be considered as a sign of insubordination.

He thinks for a moment, then becomes agitated.

- But we have to move fast. There's no time to lose.

I say to myself that we wouldn't have wasted nine hours if he'd received my first phone call. But then, maybe I wouldn't have thought of it...

- I will immediately send Colonel Speidel \* to the great

■ General Hans Speidel (b. 1897). Chief of staff to General Otto von Stulpnagel in August 1940. Later a collaborator of Field Marshal Rommel, in 1944 he supported General von Choltitz's action to preserve Paris. Morally upright and increasingly opposed to Hitler, he was commander of S.H.A.P.E.'s Central European forces from 1947 to 1963.

headquarters. A report through the chain of command would arrive too late. I'm also wary of telephone communications, which always go through third parties and are not always passed on to the Führer in person.

He picks up the phone and calls his chief of staff. When he doesn't get it immediately, he starts to get annoyed.

- Hello? Hello! Speidel? This is Stulpnagel. Did I wake you? No, I'm sorry. Please get dressed and come at once. It's very urgent... Yes, here, at the *Majestic*. By the way, do you know what time the mail plane leaves for headquarters? ... At 7 a.m. from Le Bourget? That's perfect. You'll have plenty of time to catch it. Take a few things for the night. Why should I do that? I'll explain it to you in person.

But Speidel is slow to arrive. Half an hour passes, all the more painful as we can find nothing more to say to each other. The general tries to fill the silence.

- I must confess," he said, "that I find the number of one hundred hostages far too high. It's a measure that was taken in the particular atmosphere of the Russian front. Given the distances



and the speed of our advance, there are a lot of Russian soldiers we haven't been able to capture. They have strayed into the forests, where they have formed groups of snipers and partisans. They are carrying out all kinds of exactions and sabotage on our rear. But what may be applicable to Russia is not so in France. Situations and mentalities are too different... In this country, ten hostages would be the maximum.

- Excellency, I refuse to enter into this sinister accounting. I disapprove of the whole hostage system. Morally, because we don't have the right to kill people for crimes they haven't committed. Politically, because it's a never-ending spiral where we know where it starts, but not where it ends.

I have the impression that, deep down, the general is relieved. If he has accepted my proposal so quickly, it's because he sees it as a way of evading an act that is repugnant to his conscience.

Finally, Colonel Speidel arrives. We had already met at the German Embassy, on the evening following the signing of the Paris Protocols. But that evening I was very busy working with Abetz on the text of the additional protocol, so I hadn't paid much attention to him. It's only now that I realize how attractive he is. His face exudes balance and honesty. One senses that he has a high conception of his profession as a soldier. Or does he look like that because I know he's about to take off for headquarters, taking all my hopes with him?

The general repeated word for word what I had just told him. When he gets to the part about the Marshal's intentions, Speidel asks to take a few notes, so as not to make a mistake. The General takes a sheet of paper, scribbles a few lines on it and hands it to him. Then the two men take their leave of each other.

As soon as the colonel had left, I made my way to the door. On the threshold, the general said to me:

- Of course, ask the Field Marshal and the Admiral not to make any irrevocable gestures until I've had the Führer's answer. That would put me in an untenable situation.

- I'm sure they'll understand. For my part, I ask you to halt all hostage executions until Colonel Speidel returns.

- That goes without saying.

When I leave the *Majestic* Hotel, daylight is beginning to break. The Champs-Élysées are still in darkness. But a grayish glow appears low over the roofs of the Louvre.

I return directly to Hôtel Matignon, without passing through my house, to inform the Admiral of the outcome of my approach. I tell him of my hope that things will work out, while stressing that so far I've only obtained a reprieve. I ask him to warn the Marshal as soon as he's up, to dissuade him from coming to the demarcation line.

No sooner had I finished than M. de Brinon was announced. The Delegate General in the Occupied Territories is distraught too. Like me, he hasn't slept since the night before and his face is even paler than usual. He tried feverishly to reach me last night, but couldn't, as he didn't know I was at the Palais d'Orsay. I'm updating him on my conversations. But he's very worried about the future.

- There was probably nothing else to do," he tells me, "but I doubt the Chancellor will go back on his decision. He's haunted by the fear that the slightest retreat on his part could be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

That's what I'm afraid of, too. After half an hour we agree that it's a waste of time to try and predict Hitler's reaction.

All day long on the 22nd, I don't know what to do with myself, because nothing can hold my attention. I cancelled all my appointments and spent hours walking in circles in Matignon's garden. I try to imagine the mass that a group of a hundred men can make, but without succeeding. I'm becoming increasingly tense as the forty-eight-hour deadline approaches.

Finally, on the 23rd, just before midnight, my phone rang. I'm being called from the *Majestic*. I jump on the phone.

- I've just received a reply from headquarters," says General von Stulpnagel.

- Is it favorable?

I'm on pins and needles.

- I can't tell you over the phone.

- You're torturing me I At least tell me, yes or no, if it's satisfactory!

A few seconds pass, which seem interminable. Then I hear the general say:

- You've won!

My God, my God, is it possible? The hostages would be saved?

- May I come and see you?

- I'll be waiting for you.

- I'm coming!

This time the general received me standing up. He shakes my hand for a long time and says:

- I can tell you that the Führer has extended the grace period from forty-eight hours to fifteen days.

I feel everything wobbling around me and have to hold on to the back of an armchair.

- But it's awful!" I exclaimed. We're no further ahead! It's as impossible to find the perpetrator in a fortnight as it was in two! When this new deadline passes, we'll find ourselves back at exactly the same point. How could you tell me I'd won?

Suddenly, all my hopes were dashed, all my courage abandoned. How can the general be so relaxed?

Seeing my disappointment, he approaches me and says:

- I'm telling you: you've won!

I look at him without understanding. Why is he laughing at me? Then he does something completely unexpected: he puts his hand on my shoulder. I flinch. Not because I find this familiarity inappropriate, but because, generally speaking, I hate being touched. At the same time, I see an indefinable smile on his face that I've never seen before.

- Listen to me! Let's forget for a moment that you're a French minister and I'm a German general. There are just two men here, face to face, both trying to do their duty. Of the two of us, I am considerably older. As such, I have more experience than you of the methods of military administration. When you've got a first grace period, you can get a second. Once you've got a second, you can get a third, after which the case is closed and never spoken of again.

I remain incredulous. It doesn't seem convincing to me.

- You think so?

- I'm certain of it! I can even provide you with proof: the Führer has set two conditions for extending the deadline. Firstly, he wants the French government to make a public statement disassociating itself from the perpetrator of the attack; secondly, he wants it to take the necessary measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. Armistice is not peace. But it is a reciprocal commitment not to resort to arms.

- You can't either!

- In any case, the Führer wouldn't set conditions if he still

intended to shoot the hostages. Believe me: you've won!

I feel a little reassured.

- What you've just told me, can I pass it on to the Marshal in any way other than as a personal hypothesis?

- You bet! In fact, I urge you to do so as soon as possible.

\*

Back at Matignon, I call the *Hôtel du Parc*. The Maréchal has already gone to bed. I get M. du Moulin de Labarthète. I pass on to him the words of the German military commander in France, stressing that the Chancellor is now awaiting a statement from the French government. Then I put down my earpiece with a sense of relief. My mission is over.

Alas! I am mistaken. The next morning, M. du Moulin calls me back.

- I passed on your message to the Marshall last night. He expresses his satisfaction. As far as the declaration is concerned, he would like you to make it yourself. Since you led the negotiations, he feels you are in a better position to choose the terms.

I struggle. I argue once again that, from the outset, this mission was not my responsibility, and that I don't want to be involved in any incidents that may arise in the occupied zone, otherwise my task will become quite impossible. But the Marshal, consulted, maintains his point of view.

- He's giving you *carte blanche*," says du Moulin, "but he wants it to be you.

All I have to do now is bow.

In the afternoon I go to the Champs-Élysées studios to have my statement recorded. The radio will broadcast it tomorrow, on the three morning, midday and evening programs. I preface my speech with the following announcement, made by a speaker:

*"The Marshal's government has learned with disapproval of the attack perpetrated on August 21 against Midshipman Moser of the German Navy. It warns the population against this kind of action, the only effect of which is to lead the occupying authorities to take reprisals, which in any case can only strike French people. He has asked Mr. Benoist-Méchin, Secretary of State to the Vice President of the Council, to make the commentary on this subject that you are about to hear.*

Then I take the microphone and declare:





Trip to Berchtesgaden in May 1941. Visit to Koenigsplatz in Munich.  
From left to right: Strack, chief of protocol, Admiral Darlan, Benoist-Méchin and  
Counselor Schleier of the German Embassy in Paris.



Franco-German conference in Berchtesgaden on May 11, 1941. From left to right: Hitler, Abetz, Darlan, advisor Schleier and Benoist-Méchin.

Inauguration of the Lyon Fair by Marshal Pétain. Benoist-Méchin is in the center, between the Marshal and Admiral Darlan.



Official delegation in the courtyard of the Invalides for the presentation of the pennant of the first two regiments of the Légion Tricolore. From left to right: Bucard, Admiral Platon, Marcel Déat, Mme de Carbuccia, Damand, General Havard, Commandant de Lestranger, Benoist-Méchin.

Benoist-Méchin and Colonel Puau review the first contingent of Tricolor Legion volunteers assembled in Guéret.



Laval cabinet in April 1942. From left to right: Admiral Platon, Barthélémy, le Maréchal, Pierre Laval. Cathala. In the 2<sup>e</sup> row: Dr Grasset, Admiral Auphan, General Bridoux, Bonnafous, Benoist-Méchin, Fernand de Brinon, Abel Bonnard, Moysset, Bichelonne, Brévié, Gibrat, Lucien Romier.

Inauguration of the Arno Breker exhibition at the Pavillon du Jeu de Paume in May 1942. Left: Abel Bonnard and Benoist-Méchin. Middle right: Serge Lifar, Arno Breker and Fernand de Brinon.

Model of the Arc de Triomphe that the Maréchal had asked Benoist-Méchin to build at the rond-point de la Défense, where the tomb of the Unknown Soldier would have been transferred.

IF LE PRESIDENT DE LA REPUBLIQUE VOUS RECEVRA EN AUDIENCE ■LE HARDI 29 JUILLET A 16 HEURES 50 AU SUJET DE L'AFFAIRE

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The 'Attorney General . at the High Court of Justice

^DENOIST MLCH IN= " in Liaître .AUJOL

Lawyer Bd XSurice Barrés  
~ 1RUILLY (Seine)

\_\_\_\_\_ the honor of bringing to your attention

Telegram sent by the President of the Republic to<sup>e</sup> Jean-Louis Aujol, defender of Benoist-Méchin, after his death sentence by the High Court.

PARQUÊT GÉNÉRAL PRÈS  
LA HAUTE COUR ' ' Paria, 17 August 8 -19 47.  
DE JUSTICE

connaissance que, par Décret de Monsieur J le Président de la "République en date du 30 Juillet 1947, la pei\$e de mort prononcée nâr la Haute Cour de Justice le 6 Juin 1947, contre le Sieur BEh'OIST-læCHIN Jacques, s'étée'commuée<sub>r</sub> en celle des travaux forcés à perpétuité.

/...The Public Prosecutor,\

■ ■

Benoist-Méchin is pardoned.



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MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

Div""et des Affaires Criminelles
et des Grâces

FRENCH REPUBLIC .

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DECREE OF GRACE

The PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC acting in Council

Supérieur de le Magistrature |

la Lai constitutionnelle du 27 Octobre 1946)

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Pardons, commutations or reduc- are granted.

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i June 6, 1947

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35\*)- BENOIST-MECHIN "Haute Cour de Justice "Peine
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"in 20 years
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A..... U. 4.

Signed in PARIS " December 7, 1954 -
signed I René COÏT "

Æ 4.<-> -

By the President of the Republic - . ' - '■-i '

The Keeper of the Seals r
Minister of Justice i

' \*\* --

"a Président du Conseil f
signed t MENDES-FRANCE -

Signed "QUERIR do BEAUMONT.

' ■ - ■ - -

V;V"■

FOR CERTIFIED EXTRACT .

"I'd like to address the entire Parisian population, and especially
young people.

"You recently saw posters on the walls of the capital announcing
that one hundred French hostages would be shot in reprisal for
the murder of a German midshipman. They aroused legitimate
emotion in you. You immediately understood the dangers to which
you would be exposed if this kind of attack were to be repeated...

"When a foreign army is camped on our soil, I understand that
ardent, patriotic youth feel it their duty to continue the fight.

(I remember seeing 'the wagon containing the assassins of
Commandant de Montalègre, when I was in Upper Silesia. I also
remember the little Baltic Junker over whose body I bent down during
the occupation of the Ruhr. Can I deny to my own the esteem I had
accorded to others?)

*"This is nothing new. Examples can be found in all wars. In 1871, for example, Prussian artillery pieces stationed in Bougival were sabotaged by an unknown person. General von Moltke took hostages from the civilian population and threatened to shoot them if the culprit was not discovered within eight days. But the culprit, aware of his responsibility and unwilling to spill innocent blood, denounced himself, and the hostages were not shot. I salute his courage and self-sacrifice.*

*"But when a man murders a young German sailor in the subway, with his back turned and unsuspecting; when this man disappears into the crowd and never shows his face again, even though he knows that his act will lead to the deaths of a hundred of his compatriots - I refuse to consider him a hero.*

*"For my part, I abhor these attacks carried out in the dead of night, which can have no other effect than to kill innocent people. There's something furtive and clandestine about them, which I see as the mark of a foreign influence. The French - for we are an old military people - don't fight like that! They fight by taking full responsibility for their actions, without passing the consequences on to others. I'm sure that in formulating this opinion, I'm simply expressing your own.*

*"Your life is hard enough as it is. Don't encourage those who seek to make it even more difficult. In signing the armistice, the Marshal wished to put an end to bloodshed that no longer served any purpose, since it could not alter the verdict of arms. His government's mission is to protect and defend you. Do not facilitate the action of subversive elements whose sole aim is to make it impossible for him to continue his task.*

This declaration, which corresponds to my convictions, costs me no effort. But it has earned me some bitter reproaches from the *Majestic Hotel*.

- What's this I hear?" calls General von Stulpnagel. You've just made a statement on the radio that justifies the murder of Aspirant Moser? That's the last straw!

- But no, Excellency! Read the text carefully: you'll see that it's nothing of the sort. Besides," I said, letting go a little of my nerves, which have been all too tense over the last few days, "I wouldn't have had to speak out like this if you hadn't put up posters all over Paris without even consulting us...

The general doesn't push the argument any further, because he

knows well - even if he doesn't want to admit it - how much this affair put him in a difficult situation. He's visibly relieved. So am I, for that matter. I'm happy to think that a hundred men will still be able to see the dawn without fearing it will be their last. But I can't take much credit for it. Without the Marshal's threat to present himself at the demarcation line and Admiral Darlan's very firm attitude, I wouldn't have achieved anything.

Yet the atmosphere remains heavy. There's drama in the air. Some of the "hardliners" on the *Majestic* staff, including representatives of the Kriegsmarine, who feel more personally affected by Midshipman Moser's death, are said to be furious at what they see as a "retreat". They say it will encourage further attacks. In any case, the matter is no longer in my hands, and I hope it never will be again...

Barely five days have passed when the phone rings with news of another attack. And this time, the victim is a Frenchman.

\* German reprisals were swift. The first hostage executions took place on August 28.

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CHAPTER XII

THE HEART OF PIERRE LAVAL

(August 29, 1941)

The whirlwind of events I found myself caught up in - the May 5th agreement, the visit to Berchtesgaden, the battle over protocols, the Syrian affair, my mission to the Orient, the finalization of my July 14th notes, not to mention my intervention on behalf of the hostages - caused me to lose contact with Pierre Laval. I haven't seen him since I tried to organize the meeting with the Marshal at La Ferté-Hauterive. But his attitude towards the Darlan government didn't help our relationship either. Tucked away in his apartment on the Place du Palais-Bourbon or in his pavilion at Villa Saïd, he has kept around him a "clientele" of former collaborators and friends, to whom he speaks without kindness about the Admiral, whom he has not forgiven for having supplanted him in the government. I still have the greatest admiration for the former mayor of Aubervilliers. His courage, flexibility and passionate temperament fascinate me. His humor too, for he's not short of it. I'd often like to ask his advice, to draw on his experience, but Darlan is my boss. He shows me the kind of trust that honors and honors me towards him. Going to Laval behind his back would be interpreted by him as a disloyal act.

It took tragic circumstances to bring me to visit him.

On the evening of August 27, 1941, I received a telephone call from the Prefect of Seine-et-Oise at Hôtel Matignon, informing me that an attempt had been made on the life of the former President of the Council. A young man by the name of Colette had discharged his revolver point-blank at him as he left the Queen's barracks in Versailles, where he had gone to review the first contingent of the L.V.F. leaving for the Eastern Front.

Urgently rushed to hospital, the President is in the worst of health. The doctors' diagnosis is guarded. Isn't it said that a bullet has lodged in his heart? If this is true, it looks like he won't survive for more than a few hours...

Yet he survived, and two days later I was allowed to pay him a short visit.

I find him lying in a small white room that smells of iodine tincture and ether. His face is emaciated, but calm. His hands, the color of old ivory, rest on his sheet. He is still very weak, having lost a great deal of blood.

- Well, there you are..." he said with an imperceptible smile. It's

good to see you again. You remember... La Ferté-Hauterive... The letter of apology...

If I remember!

- That's a long way off," I reply.

- But no! That was yesterday. It all makes sense...

The evocation of these memories seems to give him back some strength.

- On December 13th, many French people were led to believe that I was the evil genius of the Marshal, the evil genius of France. It's true that I have a dark complexion, but still! They said I was in league with Germany, that I was on my knees in front of the occupiers, what else? And today, they're shooting at me. It's the same old story... It will happen again... Do you think you can scare me? It's not Colette who's at fault. I've just asked the Marshal for a pardon. He's been deceived too... I know that by acting as I do, I'm defending my country better than many others who swagger on the radio, without any risk to themselves...

He stops for a moment. I'm afraid he's tired from talking so much, because he looks exhausted. His eyes close, then open again after a moment with that sparkling gleam I know so well.

- I said I wasn't scared. No, you weren't. I shouldn't say that. I was scared, yes, very scared, when I heard the first detonations. I knew right away what was happening. In spite of myself, my heart sank and that's what saved me. Doctor Barragué, who treated me, told me. The bullet lodged in the right place. But my heart had contracted. The bullet nestled just below it, and when my heart relaxed, it came back to rest on top of it. Now we're reluctant to extract it. It's funny, though, what life's all about...

- As they say: hanging on by a thread! You must have suffered a lot?

- No, not so much. I fainted. Deep down, I'm happy with what happened...

- Happy?

- But yes. People always suspect my sincerity. Because I'm a politician, they think I'm always lying. London radio repeats it every day... The Marshal and the soldiers resent me for not being a soldier, a combatant dressed to the nines and standing at attention... But I've been fighting all my life. I've fought a much harder battle than they can imagine... From Kienthal to today, it's unbelievable the blows I've received, the insults I've been showered with... Now that my blood has been spilled, will they still say I'm insincere?

His voice is suddenly much louder and he makes an effort to straighten up.

- Tell me," he continued, "do you think, now that my blood has been spilled in the circumstances you know about, that the Germans will be able to refuse me what I ask of them in the name of France? No, do you? Then that's good. All's well... I don't regret what happened to me...

His head falls back on the pillow and his eyelids close. I sense that the effort he has made to talk to me has exhausted him. He seems to be dozing off, while a soothing smile plays on his lips. They still quiver at times, as if he's still talking to himself.

I tiptoe out of the room so as not to wake him.



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## CHAPTER XIII

## A MESSAGE FROM HITLER

(November 10, 1941)

Six weeks passed with no new news. Negotiations were at a standstill. While feigning indifference to this silence, I moped around Matignon. The Marshal, for his part, was finding the time long at the *Hôtel du Parc*. He was visibly worried, and felt he had to make a gesture to renew the dialogue. And so it came to October 28, the anniversary of Montoire. The Marshal decided to seize the opportunity to address a letter to the Chancellor, and asked me to prepare a draft for him. I retreated for forty-eight hours to the *Hôtel de Nouilles* in Marseille, to carry out this task undisturbed...

Although my memory is good, I have no recollection of the tone or content of this letter. Nor have I kept a copy, so I'm unable to say anything about it here. Apart from the fact that it mainly referred to the considerable emotion aroused both in the Marshal and in public opinion by the execution of the hostages. Has it been found in the German archives? To this day, I don't know.

What I remember very well, however, is that the Marshal was painfully surprised to receive no reply to his message, not even the simplest acknowledgement of receipt, which struck him as rude. A fortnight passed. Finally, on November 10, the Führer's reply arrived. I'm reproducing large extracts here (in the official translation) because I don't believe it has ever been published, and because it seems to me to be significant for the way it distributes light and shade, praise and blame, in other words, for its mix of

threats for the immediate and views for the future.

*Grand Quartier Général*

*November 10, 1941*

*Monsieur le Maréchal,*

*Allow me first of all to express my sincere thanks for the letter in which, on the occasion of the anniversary of Montoire Day, you convey to me the expression of your unchanged sentiments. I too remember the moving moment when I was able to meet Your Excellency, the former commander-in-chief of the French soldiers of the Great War and the venerable head of the French state today.*

But after the compliments came the reproaches:

*From your letter, Mr. Marshal, I believe I can deduce your deep regret that the collaboration inaugurated a year ago has not led to the results we were entitled to expect. I must point out, however, that in this case the fault lies neither with myself nor with Germany. The surprising reshuffle of the French government a few weeks later, motivated in a way that was extremely hurtful to me, led to disappointments that have not yet been fully overcome...*

It was an admission that the self-esteem wounds inflicted on the Führer by the events of December 13, 1940 had not yet healed.

*In your letter, Monsieur le Maréchal, you complain that there are still French prisoners of war in Germany. But surely you remember that, more than a year and a half after the end of the world war, German prisoners of war were still being held in France. Today, almost forty percent of the French soldiers taken prisoner by us have been returned to their families. But above all, I would like to point out one fact: it was not Germany that declared war on France, but France on Germany, and for no reason whatsoever...*

Hitler then spoke of "the failure of his countless offers of peace, renewed right up to the last days before the outbreak of hostilities":

*It was intolerable, for me as for every German, that the strongest military power on the continent should not only allow itself to be*

*provoked in the most insolent manner by a state which, from a military point of view, should be considered a small power, Poland, but that, in addition, even those states with which we had no serious dispute and to which I had always offered Germany's friendship were pushing for war in a truly inconceivable way and rejecting any attempt at understanding. For, without the encouragement of the French government of the time, England would not have dared to unleash its criminal enterprise of a new world war, without any reason and with incredible lightness. The French government of the time therefore bears its share of responsibility for the fact that there are still more than a million Frenchmen trapped in Germany, as well as nine million German soldiers engaged in a bloody struggle.*

Personally, I would have thought that France had entered the war under pressure from England, and that Hitler had a tendency to reverse roles. But I knew that he had a "soft spot" for the British Empire, and preferred to lighten its responsibilities in order to lighten ours. He would then turn to the hostage issue, evoking the emotion it aroused in the Marshal:

*I have learned, Monsieur le Maréchal, that you were indignant that hostages were shot in reprisal for the murder of German officers\*. I believe, Monsieur le Maréchal, that the only one who has the right to be indignant about these events is me, or the victims themselves, or the families of the German officers who, although innocent, were shot in the back.*

*1°) These officers didn't come to France for pleasure: it was France's declaration of war on September 3, 1939 that brought them here. They would all prefer*

1. In particular, the execution of ten hostages following attacks on members of the German army on September 6, 10 and 11, 1941.

*live in Germany with their families, rather than fulfill their obligations as occupants in a foreign country;*

*2°) They fulfilled the mandate imposed on them, against their will, by their duty as soldiers, without any indignity and with great propriety.*

Hitler then compared the attitude of the German occupying forces in France with that of the French occupying forces in the Rhineland. Although the number of women raped seemed clearly excessive, I

had to agree that it was reminiscent of scenes I had witnessed myself in Silesia and the Ruhr.

*In this respect, we have enough to compare with the attitude of the French authorities during the occupation of the Rhineland, when not only men, but also women and girls were whipped off the sidewalks by German citizens; during which over sixteen thousand German women and girls were raped, sometimes even by negroes, without the French military authorities bothering to intervene against such excesses, while, conversely, the most minor offences against the occupying authorities themselves were punished with the most severe penalties, including deportation and, in many cases, death.*

These last lines were an undisguised allusion to Schlageter, sentenced to death by a French war council during the occupation of the Ruhr, and to the assassins of Commandant de Montalègre, whom I had seen pass in front of me when I was station commissioner in Breslau. I had also seen Beethoven's birthplace in Bonn guarded by Senegalese riflemen, an act in which I perceived a deliberate desire to offend German sensibilities. The whipping, on the other hand, was overblown. It had been committed by the commander of the small town of Andernach, who had been immediately relieved of his duties by General Dégoutté. So what had been an isolated case could not be generalized. There was also something distressing in the way Hitler brought up all the old grievances without forgetting a single one. It seemed to me to echo the "catalog of reproaches" that Mr. von Ribbentrop had showered on me during our conversation on April 6. All the more so as Hitler's threats did not stop there:

*You must know, Monsieur le Maréchal," he added, "that murder, pillage, despoilment and rape are punishable by death, and that wherever we exercise the authority of the occupying power, we grant the French people at least the same protection as our own German people. And this in a country whose leaders left no doubt at the time about their intention, in the event of victory, to dismember Germany, take the Rhineland from us once and for all, evacuate thousands of Germans, and so on.*

Now it was the turn of the "policy of dismembering Germany", the

harmfulness of which I had already denounced at the age of seventeen, and which I feared we would one day have to deal with.

*You can judge how great is my indignation when I, as Führer and supreme commander of the Reich's armed forces, have to observe that officers, having done nothing other than fulfill their duty - a duty imposed on them against their own will by France itself - are shot in the back by cowards. I have therefore ordered the hostages to be shot, and they will continue to be shot as long as the culprits have not been unmasked or the crimes have not been brought to an end...*

I was surprised that Hitler, who had made so many speeches praising the young Germans who had done the same during the occupation of the Ruhr, refused to accept that young Frenchmen could consider it their duty to rise up against foreign occupation.

*You must understand this, Monsieur le Maréchal, and you will as an old officer. Moreover, as soon as France's debacle was over, and even though I was aware of France's war aims, I was prepared to establish, in contrast to France's attitude in 1918, an era of reconciliation and reasonable understanding, especially as I naturally realize that not all French people can be held responsible for the crime of September 3, 1939. However, if my efforts in this direction are met with attacks on officers of my army*

*of occupation, I will coldly and resolutely employ all the means which - as demonstrated by all the experiments carried out to date - are sure to restore absolute calm and order in the short term by annihilating the individuals directly or indirectly responsible.*

This language could not be accused of being ambiguous. It said clearly what it meant, and promised further reprisals in the - infinitely probable - event of renewed attacks. Were we to believe that he was telling the truth, this senior official of the Reich Propaganda Ministry who, informing me of a conversation he had had with Goebbels, assured me that his minister had said to him: ■ As far as France is concerned, Hitler is of the opinion, now as then, that we will never reach an amicable agreement. All this talk of collaboration is just verbiage. Besides, he only wants to hear the facts, not the words. Whatever the outcome of the war, France will pay dearly, for it was she who provoked and unleashed it. ■ To which Goebbels had added,

as a personal comment: "If the French knew what the Führer wants to demand of them, they would shed every tear in their bodies. That's why it's better to conceal these things for the time being and reap all the benefits we can from their wait-and-see attitude." I would have been tempted to take Goebbels' word for it - all the more so as the Marshal's entourage had not ceased to multiply the initiatives most likely to inflame German mistrust - if, after this succession of warning shots, Hitler's letter had not contained passages that seemed inspired by an entirely different spirit:

*Please believe me, Mr. Marshal, such a decision is very painful for me, and I would prefer to take the other path I proposed to you a year ago at Montoire. For, in the long run, Germans and French will be forced to live with each other and next to each other. They'll be living the life they've made for themselves, which is to say, well or badly. The only ones who can be interested in our misunderstanding are not those who have their roots in our soil, but the powers that have never seen their past and will never see their future except in the discord of this continent.*

1. Similar statements can be found in: Joseph Goebbels, *Diary*, April 26 and 30, 1942.

The same sentiments were expressed in the passage devoted to the Russian campaign:

*If on June 22 (1941) I hadn't decided at the last minute to ward off the Bolshevik danger, there's one eventuality that could all too easily have happened: the collapse of Germany... But then the French people would also have been the victims of a terrible catastrophe. For - I can affirm without presumption - only the German army was capable of facing up to the appalling tidal wave that was preparing to submerge Europe. Failure on our part would have marked the end of our civilized continent for centuries to come, perhaps even forever. The Anglo-Saxon warmongers, in their insane blindness, would certainly have understood too late what the consequences of the Bolshevization of this continent would have been, not only for our unfortunate peoples, but also for their own. This is why, Mr. Marshal, I dare to express the hope that the French government will also do everything in its power to curb, by effective means, the elements which are striving, precisely at this moment, to poison relations between the occupying authorities and the French people.*

After which the letter ended in a more reassuring tone:

*Permit me, Monsieur le Maréchal, to conclude this letter by reiterating to you the assurance of my personal veneration and by expressing to you my wish that, in the interests of our two peoples and, consequently, of the whole of Europe, the path of a collaboration be found which will help us to successfully end a war in whose continuation only the eternal enemies of the continent can have an interest...*

*In presenting you with my most sincere wishes, I am  
Your  
Adolf Hitler.*

When the Marshal handed me this message to tell him what I thought of it, I was at first puzzled. That it was sincere was indisputable: the Chancellor made a number of threats too specific to be taken lightly. To say the least, they were not likely to make our task any easier.

What also struck me in this letter was that the grievances invoked against us were exactly those that had never ceased to alarm me since I had done my military service in the Rhineland: the policy of dismembering Germany, the occupation of the Ruhr, the refusal to consider the peace proposals of Stresemann, Brüning, von Papen and Hitler, the declaration of war on December 13. All these dates represented a string of missed opportunities. But it wasn't this return to the past that I found most worrying: it was the fact that this message missed all our current problems and didn't even begin to address them. In the long run, this dialogue of the deaf became exasperating.

- So, what do you think?" insisted the Marshal, seeing that I remained silent.

- Well, Monsieur le Maréchal," I replied, "we're still between a rock and a hard place. It's an uncomfortable position, but I don't see any way of changing it until further notice. For I still can't imagine how we can ensure France's recovery by appealing to those who led her to her ruin, or build Europe with those who will always be her enemies.

CHAPTER XIV  
TWO USELESS INTERVIEWS  
(1<sup>er</sup> and December 9, 1941)

What to do to break the deadlock? We would have had to explain ourselves. But how, when all the bridges had been broken?

At the end of the note I gave Abetz on June 7, 1941, which he took with him to Berlin, I insisted that he grant the Admiral a further meeting with Hitler. But this note, too, remained unanswered, and the message sent by the Chancellor to the Field Marshal could hardly have taken its place.

Anxious to see the situation deteriorate without our being able to remedy it, the Marshall had an idea: he had asked René Fonck to let Goering know that he would like to speak to him.

Fonck was one of the most famous fighter pilots of the 14-18 war. He had confronted Goering in mid-air during the latter's command of the Richthoffen escadrille and, once the war was over, had forged with him those bonds of camaraderie and esteem that are sometimes forged between veterans. Goering, for his part, was attracted by the idea of playing a political role and - above all - demonstrating to Hitler that the poor state of Franco-German relations was largely due to Ribbentrop's lack of know-how. The two men had little love for each other, and the Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief was determined to succeed where the Reich Foreign Minister had failed. What's more, Pétain and Goering already knew each other. They had met at Marshal Pilsudski's funeral on May 17, 1935, and had spoken at some length and in a relaxed manner on the special train from Warsaw. This was an asset that both of them intended to make the most of. After several trips by Fonck between *Y Hôtel du Parc* and the



German headquarters, it was agreed that Pétain and Goering would meet on December 1<sup>er</sup> in Saint-Florentin-Vervigny, a small town in the Yonne department halfway between Troyes and Joigny, in the Reich Marshal's lounge car. All that remained was to prepare for the interview.

When Marshal Pétain told me about this project, I wasn't very enthusiastic. I really couldn't explain why, but it aroused in me a feeling of apprehension. This apprehension grew when the Marshal asked me to draft a memorandum that he intended to give to Goering. I felt this was not the best way to proceed.

- Goering is not a man of minutes and paperwork," I tell him, "he's a man of conversation and open dialogue. He's certainly flattered to talk to you, but he'll be all the more so if your interview retains an improvised and personal character. I'm afraid that handing over a note, written in advance, will freeze him and put him off. If I were you, Mr. Marshal - if you don't mind my saying so, since you're asking for my opinion - I think it would be better to rely on the inspiration of the moment, and confine yourself to outlining the framework of your interview.

But either out of shyness - for he was more shy than he let on - or because he didn't have complete confidence in his memory, the Field Marshal insisted on giving Goering a written memorandum.

After several hours of effort, I had to give up writing this document. Not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't "feel" the text. I didn't want to deviate too much from my notes of July 14th, but I didn't want to rewrite a simple version either. When I told the Marshal about the difficulties I was encountering, he didn't insist.

- Well, well," he replied, "I'll have one of my cabinet members draw up the text.

When he submitted it to me, I was dismayed: it was exactly the wrong thing to say, and in the form most likely to arouse the Reichsmarschall. I thought it my duty to warn the Head of State. But he remained deaf to my objurgations. I in turn understood that I should not insist.

The day before the meeting, the Admiral asked me to accompany him to Saint-Florentin. The two protocol departments had agreed to keep the number of VIPs present to a strict minimum, due to the lack of space in the lounge car. On the French side, there was to be the Marshal, the Admiral and, as interpreter, the sous-préfet Freund; on the German side, Marshal Goering, General Bodenschatz, his Chief of Staff, and the interpreter Schmidt. I didn't see what my presence would add, and had no

desire to play the utility man while waiting for the end of the conference in the little station at Saint-Florentin.

- Too many cooks spoil the sauce," I replied, "and I'm afraid this mavonnaise will turn sour very quickly. What's more, although I'm on good terms with Goering - he received me very kindly at the Olympic Games - I have only lukewarm sympathy for him. There's something theatrical and over-the-top about this huge character that I don't like, with his rings, lacquered nails and extravagant suits. Only his joviality is pleasant. But he thinks he's Siegfried and I think he's Falstalf, so I'm not sure how to approach him.

After a few moments' reflection, the Admiral agreed that my presence was not necessary. That evening, I boarded my plane and flew back to Paris.

Unlike the other chapters of this book, in which I recount events in which I was personally involved, this one describes a scene in which I took no part. But I felt the flashes of it too much - like a spectator watching a play backstage - not to include it here.

When the Field Marshal and the Admiral arrived at Saint-Florentin, they were taken directly to Goering's lounge car. This was parked on the edge of the Othe forest, close to a tunnel where it could have been parked in the event of an air raid. A Luftwaffe detachment stood guard along the track.

After the customary introductions and a few polite phrases recalling their meeting on the train back from Pilsudski's funeral, Pétain and Goering, surrounded by Darlan, Bodenschatz and the two interpreters, took their places around a small table. At this point, the Marshal took the famous memorandum out of his pocket and handed it to Goering. Goering pushed it away with a gesture of denial.

- Oh no, Monsieur le Maréchal," he cried, "I came here to talk to you, not to read papers that could just as easily have been sent to me by post.

The Field Marshal then made a move to slip it into the pocket of the Reichsmarschall's jacket, but Goering protested and, at the Marshal's insistence, finally read it. He then literally exploded:

- I don't understand why the French government would presume to present me with such a document! I would be doing you and your government a great disservice if I presented this document to the Führer as it stands! You forget that all the advantages we have gained from a very costly war seem to have been wiped out with the stroke of a pen in exchange for a vague promise of cooperation from

the French people. You're demanding huge concessions from us, but in return you're offering absolutely nothing! There's not even any question of helping us in our fight against England!

"To hear you tell it, the best solution would be for us to leave French territory; but I'm quite sure that the French people would immediately urge you to take up arms against us again, and this time in a situation much more advantageous to them than in 1939!

As Goering raged on, the Field Marshal and the Admiral let the storm fall on their shoulders. For my part, I had foreseen an outburst. But I hadn't thought it could be so intense. The Marshal had tried to interrupt Goering by pointing out that it was not easy to govern Vichy France when the entire press in Paris and the occupied zone was attacking him day after day and casting suspicion on his ministers; that he was not asking the Wehrmacht to defend our Empire, but wished to obtain an increase in forces to enable the French army to defend it itself; on the German side, a political commission should be set up to negotiate with the one I chaired, in order to take the initiative away from the purely military commissions in Wiesbaden and Turin. Ever tempestuous, he continued his rambling speech:

- What did the French people do to encourage collaboration? Nothing! And yet, on our side, we freed at least 800,000 prisoners! - The French people should understand that they lost the war, but that we didn't want to inflict on them the humiliations we suffered in 1918! - We have no confidence in the ministerial offices that are undermining the work of your government... - How do you intend to defend Dakar, Morocco and Tunisia? Answer these questions clearly, because we have a huge responsibility to our people! I've been told that you only have two battalions to defend Dakar? That's ridiculous! We have the greatest interest in you defending this city. I've discussed this with Admiral Raeder. You want reinforcements in men and equipment? But how can we be sure that the equipment we could put at your disposal to defend your Empire won't one day be used against us? Etc."

He had only calmed down a little when he mentioned the Russian campaign.

- By undertaking the fight against Bolshevism, we are doing a great service to the whole of Europe, and therefore to France itself. It was when we entered Russia that we realized that this country was armed to the teeth, and that its armaments were expanding to such an extent that, within a year, it would have been impossible to curb its aims. Today,

Russia has 30,000 tanks, including 8,000 of the most advanced models. We know that, even for England, Russia presented a real danger. The French and British armies combined, with their 1939 strength, could never have defeated the Russian titan, even with American help. Only the Wehrmacht could afford to take on this colossus.

"I don't know if you realize what war is like in Russia! Strictly speaking, there is no military strategy. When a Russian soldier is killed, he is replaced by ten others; when a Russian tank is wiped out, ten others are substituted. And Russia has a terrible ally: mud! Today we understand why England had pinned all its hopes on Russia, a Russia supported by America!

"But what is France's attitude to what is happening in the East? Does it support us in this gigantic struggle? France talks a lot about collaboration, but is it thinking of building equipment for us? What is this fleet doing, which I'm told is intact? You assure me that the French people don't want to understand! But do the French people understand that, from a military point of view, we have annihilated 1 by fighting loyally, and that England, which was its ally, is dealing it the most insidious blows?

When Goering questioned the fleet's inaction, Admiral Darlan felt personally targeted.

- You're forgetting," he interjected, "that our fleet is still hampered by a lack of fuel and by the ties imposed on it by the armistice agreement. Besides, what would happen if I sent her to defend Dakar? She might be mistress of the seas for eight days. After that, it would be fatally annihilated by the British fleet which, despite the blows dealt it by the Luftwaffe, nonetheless represents a considerable force. What would be gained? What we need in Dakar is immediate ground and air support.

- But then again," Goering retorted, "how can I be sure that any aid given to the French army won't backfire? Five days after the start of operations in Syria, I offered you massive support from the German air force based in Crete. You refused...

- Syria was a different matter," retorted the Admiral. The game was lost. A Luftwaffe intervention would have made no difference to the outcome, and would have exposed us to reprisals elsewhere, to which we would have had nothing to oppose...

Seeing that the discussion was turning into an argument, the Marshal intervened to bring attention back to the heart of the matter:

- We cannot expose ourselves to such dangers," he said, "without

knowing what place Germany intends to reserve for us in the new Europe. If we are to win the support of the French people, we must prove to them, in a tangible way, the advantages of this policy.

But Goering stopped him in his tracks.

- The place reserved for France in the new Europe," he replied, "depends eminently on how the French behave towards the other peoples of the continent. All the events currently unfolding on earth will be recorded in a ledger with two columns: debit and credit. Let's hope that the right column is more important for France. In any case, you can be sure of one thing: Germany will never pay the price. Let's hope it's England and Russia, and that France comes out on top.

Once again, it was a case of postponing the verdict until the end of hostilities...

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in the lounge car remained charged with electricity. But there was one thing that prevented Goering from ending the interview with a break: the fear of giving Ribbentrop a victory by showing the Führer that he had been no more successful than his Foreign Minister. So he insisted on ending the meeting with less harsh words.

- In a more conciliatory tone, he told the Field Marshal, "I'll read over the written note you gave me and submit it to the Führer, after eliminating the points I find most offensive. This is a great gesture of goodwill on my part.

The two delegations then parted company in a tense atmosphere.

I'd been at the Hôtel Matignon all day. It could have been six o'clock in the evening when my phone rang. It was the Admiral calling from the Saint-Florentin station.

- Is the conference over?

- Yes, Goering and Bodenschatz have just left for Paris on their special train.

- How did things go?

- At its worst.

- Ah!

All day long, I'd lived in a state of mild anxiety, but suddenly I felt the vice tightening around my heart.

- How did Goering react to the memorandum?

- At first he refused to consider it, but as the Marshal insisted, he finally read it. Then he literally exploded with anger... You were right: it would have been better not to give him the paper. It's a pity you weren't here, as I asked you to be... You could have put a little oil in the wheels...

- You do me great honor. But I don't think so. From the outset, the affair was a bad one. And the Marshal?

- He's very tired. The discussion was tough. On several occasions we came very close to breaking up. I'll tell you more about it later. For the moment, we have to move quickly to limit the damage.

- What breakage? Is it really that bad?

- Yes, Goering has left for Paris. I'm afraid he'll give free rein to his discontent, stir up the press in the occupied zone and create an atmosphere conducive to reprisals. Immediately summon the journalists to Matignon. Draft a soothing communiqué which you will ask them to broadcast urgently on the radio and reproduce in all the newspapers tomorrow morning.

- You're very good," I replied. How do you expect me to write this press release? I don't know anything about it... I don't know anything that's been said.

- Say generalities. The main thing is to take the wind out of Goering's sails and prevent the Paris papers from making a big deal of it. Good-bye. The Marshal is waiting for me. We leave for Vichy.

I wanted to ask the Admiral a few more questions, but he hung up.

I immediately summoned the journalists and gave them a brief statement in which I assured them that everything had gone well. Today, when I reread it, I'm not very proud of it, because it was exactly the opposite of the truth and reflected an optimism I didn't share. It's one of the miseries of politics that you end up in this kind of situation. You can only escape it if you're the strongest. And we weren't. The only thing that justifies it in my eyes is the fact that it may have prevented Goering from taking regrettable measures against the population. I would no doubt have formulated it differently if I'd had an hour to think about it. But, once again, I didn't have a minute to lose: I had to act before Goering's train entered the Gare de Lyon.

Fortunately, the Admiral's fears were not realized. By the time the Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief landed in Paris around 9 p.m., his mood had changed. The next day, he gave a reception for five hundred people at the Cercle Interallié. Deeply artistic and seduced, once again, by the beauties of the capital, his joviality had returned.

\*

Nine days later - on December 9, 1941 - a second meeting took place. It

took place not in a lounge car, but under the gilded panelling of the Madama Palace in Turin. The two interlocutors were a Ligurian and a Gascon: Admiral Darlan and Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

I was no more present at the Turin meeting than at the one in Saint-Florentine, but this time, I don't know why, for this first resumption of contact with the Italian government was of the utmost interest to me. I saw it as a sign that things were maturing and that we would soon reach a decisive turning point.

Yet this interview was - if possible - even more disappointing than the other. I never did find out exactly what was said, as the Admiral assured me that Mussolini's son-in-law was insolently reserved, and that the conversation was limited to an exchange of banalities. No communiqué was issued, apart from a few insignificant lines, and I have every reason to believe that the results were harmful.

Not quite, though. For the two interlocutors had sniffed each other out warily, like two dogs that don't yet know whether they're going to play together or go for each other's throats. At the end of the interview, Ciano had said to his chief of staff, with an air of superiority:

- I thought I was meeting a great sailor, but all I saw was a little politician.

Naturally, the word was passed on to the Admiral, who replied:

- I thought I was meeting a diplomat of stature, but all I saw was a gigolo.

As is well known, this exchange of amenities had done nothing to improve their relationship.

And so, in less than ten days, two meetings had taken place which could have unblocked everything, but which, to say the least, had done little to move things forward. We had to wait and wait some more... By dint of being prolonged, the wait was becoming exhausting.

However, we wouldn't have to wait much longer, as this stagnation would come to an end a few days later. In less than a week, events would unfold at a dizzying pace, drawing us once again into the vortex of war.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE MIRAGE OF PEACE

(December 1941 - February 1942)

Increasingly convinced that salvation would come from the Mediterranean, I had asked Admiral Duplat, whom I had met at the Admirals' Conference, to keep an eye on this theater of operations and keep me informed of what was happening there. Thanks to our delegate to the armistice commission in Turin, I now had an important source of information that gave me an overview of the movements of the Italo-German corps in Libya and the state of its links with Taranto and Sicily.

When Mussolini entered the war on July 10, 1940, driven by the fear of remaining on the sidelines of victory, "with his hands full of flies", he thought he'd just have to sit down at the peace conference. Contrary to his predictions, however, he found himself with the full weight of a battle on his shoulders, and since then the Italian army had suffered nothing but setbacks. These began in the autumn of 1940.

At the end of September, Marshal Graziani, commanding the Italian forces in Libya, marched into Egypt. After crossing the border at Bardia, he arrived at Solloum and Sidi-Barani. The British, who had almost nothing to oppose him, quickly withdrew. Had Graziani been able to exploit this success, he would probably have entered Alexandria without a fight. But he preferred to stop and regroup his forces, fortify the ground and build a road along the coast, giving the British time to recover.

Recovering from his surprise, Wavell didn't want to give him time to consolidate his positions. On December 9, he counter-attacked with resources far inferior in number to those of the Italians, but



infinitely more powerful and better equipped. After recapturing Sidi-Barani and Solloum, he crushed the bulk of the Italian forces at Capuzzo (December 16) and took Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi. On February 8, 1941, he reached El-Agheila, at the bottom of Syrte. The campaign ended in disaster for the Italians. Not only had they lost Cyrenaica, but they had left the British with 130,000 prisoners, 1,300 cannons and 400 tanks, not to mention armored cars and machine guns. Had Wavel been able to continue his advance, he would have easily conquered the whole of Tripolitania, definitively expelling the Italians from Libya. But Churchill had broken his momentum by drawing on his forces to send an expeditionary force to Greece.

Alarmed by the loss of Cyrenaica, Mussolini, who had hitherto refused any help from the Germans, had asked Hitler to "lend" him two or three armored divisions. So it was that a small German battleship corps, comprising the 5<sup>e</sup> light division and the 15<sup>e</sup> Panzerdivision, arrived in Tripoli under the command of General Rommel (February 12, 1941). Rommel had been instructed "to confine himself to re-establishing the situation in Libya, to practise a defensive strategy on the spot and to refrain from any large-scale operations".

But Rommel had understood from the outset that warfare in the desert - that enormous empty space, dotted with strongpoints separated from one another by hundreds of kilometers of sand - lent itself in no way to the defensive, and that he who did not advance was condemned to retreat. For him, the essential factors for victory were mobility and surprise. It wasn't enough to "stabilize" the situation or reconquer Cyrenaica. If German intervention was to have any meaning, it had to go further, penetrate Egypt and break into Alexandria. This would open up immense prospects for the armored group. The Afrikakorps would "fan out" into the Nile delta, enter Cairo, seize the Suez Canal and move up through Palestine and Syria to the Turkish border. These successes," wrote Rommel, "could have been achieved with relatively limited means, but their strategic and economic value would have been immeasurably greater than the conquest of the Don loop. Before us would have opened up territories containing almost unlimited reserves of raw materials, Africa and the Middle East, which would have freed us from any worries about our oil supplies. Reinforcing my army with a small number of motorized divisions would have been enough to cause the

complete collapse of all British forces stationed in the Orient<sup>1</sup> ."

These views were not shared by either Halder or von Brauchitsch. But it was "with a very clear awareness of the formidable possibilities offered by the North African theater of operations" that Rommel launched his first offensive. On March 24, panning from Souerat, he had dislodged the British from El-Agheila. On April 8, he entered El-Mechili; on April 10, Derna, where he captured almost the entire British headquarters. From there, on the heels of Wavell's rearguards, he invested Tobruk (April 13-14) and pushed on to Solloum, on the Egyptian border. By early June, all of Cyrenaica had been reconquered. One more push and he would reach Alexandria...

But at that very moment, the Afrikakorps was "out of breath". Not that its fighters were out of action. On the contrary, they were full of energy. But supplies had not kept up - the armored corps was short of food, ammunition and fuel. Damaged tanks could not be replaced. How to explain such a deficiency?

You only have to look at the map to understand why. All Afrikakorps land operations depended on its maritime supply lines, from which it was suspended as from an umbilical cord. When these lines were functioning normally, the Afrikakorps advanced; when they were cut, it was obliged to stop. And as desert warfare was incompatible with immobility, the Afrikakorps was condemned to retreat.

What had to be done to prevent the supply lines from being disrupted? Two things, not three: either neutralize Malta, from where the R.A.F. destroyers and squadrons torpedoed the convoys; or route the supplies via Bizerte. As the Italian Admiralty systematically refused to attack Malta, arguing that it would cause huge losses<sup>1</sup>, transit via Tunisia became more important every day. Ultimately, the salvation of Libya and the conquest of the Middle East depended on the use of Bizerte. I was therefore not wrong to assert that "Germany and Italy had a pressing need for this base, and even if they didn't believe it - or pretended not to - the time would inevitably come when they would be forced to agree. On that day, they would no longer speak of "the state of tension", because our help would have become indispensable to them. On that day, too, it was to be expected that they would choose between two solutions: the use of force or negotiation. It would then be up to us to play our card skilfully enough to persuade them to prefer the latter.

On June 15, realizing that the Afrikakorps was at a standstill, Wavell launched a new offensive, with the aim of delivering the coup de grâce and clearing Tobruk . Bypassing the German outposts

from the south, he marched on Capuzzo in the hope of crushing the German forces in the very place where, six months earlier, he had annihilated Graziani's army. But if the Afrikakorps could no longer advance, it was still in a position to react. Boldly shifting the focus of the battle from Capuzzo to Sidi-Suleiman, Rommel had maneuvered so well that he had routed the British (June 17). This failure, which cost the British 220 tanks, led to the disgrace of Wavell, whom Churchill replaced with General Auchinleck\*.

The battle of Sollum - as it came to be known - had made a deep impression on the "Commando

Supreme". Rommel's maneuvering talent could no longer be disputed. General Roatta, a member of the Italian General Staff, had visited Rommel in Africa, where he had told him: "We consider it essential to reinforce Axis troops in the North African theater of operations. German troops will be increased to four motorized divisions; Italian troops to one corps comprising three armored divisions and two or three motorized divisions.

Rommel couldn't have wished for more. Unfortunately for him, these troops never reached their destination. If they had arrived in North Africa in the autumn of 1941," he was to write later, "and if their supply had been assured, we would have been able to repel the British winter offensive in Marmarique, if Auchinleck had launched it at all. In addition, we would have had sufficient forces to wipe out the British army in Egypt in 1942, to invade Mesopotamia and to cut the Russians off from Basra<sup>1</sup>. This would have been a fatal blow for Great Britain, and even for the Soviets."

But although Roatta's promises had not been kept, a serious effort had been made to ■ beef up" the Italian-German expeditionary corps. On July 25, 1941, it comprised :

*As for the Italians :*

- 1 corps d'armée d'intancerie ;
- 2 motorized divisions (Pavia and Brescia) ;
- 2 armored divisions (Trieste and Ariete).

*As far as the Germans were concerned:*

- 2 armoured divisions (the 15<sup>e</sup> and 21<sup>e</sup> ) ;
- 1 mounted infantry division (90<sup>e</sup> Panzergrenadier division).

But the more the Italo-German corps grew, the more dependent they became on their supply lines. Everything depended more and more on the passage of convoys. If one of them was sunk, the repercussions were immediately felt on the battlefield. In the field of maritime links, the situation was most worrying.

On September 19, 1941, the Italians had tried to smuggle a convoy into

Libya, but almost all the transport boats had been sunk. For almost two months, they didn't dare try again. But as it was impossible to leave the Army of Africa without food and ammunition, a new convoy was launched on November 9. It comprised seven cargo ships, escorted by ten destroyers and two 10,000-ton cruisers, as it was known that two British battleships had recently arrived in Malta. A night engagement had taken place. All the freighters, without exception, had been sunk, along with two or three of the destroyers. The English had returned to Malta after a veritable hecatomb. Admiral Duplat had sent me a report on the subject. It said that this engagement had given rise to one of the most atrocious scenes of the war.

When the Italian Admiralty learned that seven freighters and several naval units had gone to the bottom, it dispatched two torpedo boats to the scene to save what they could of their crews. The operation was carried out at night. By some inexplicable stroke of bad luck, the rescue boats had passed, unnoticed, through the spot where hundreds of unfortunates were still struggling. They had ripped them to shreds with their propellers and set off again, dragging shreds of flesh clinging to their bows and leaving long trails of blood behind them. The next day, before announcing that the boats had perished, the Italian high command, wanting to be sure, had reconnaissance planes fly over the area. The weather was clear and the sea calm. But the pilots' attention was drawn to a spot where its color was brown and its surface agitated by an unusual bubbling. On closer inspection, they realized that the bubbling was due to the presence of thousands of sharks. Drawn to the scene by the trail of blood left behind by the rescue boats, they had flocked from all corners of the central Mediterranean to finish off the disaster with an abominable feast.

I took in the scene with a sense of horror, but without ceasing to observe the state of communications between Italy and Africa.

Suddenly, on November 18, Auchinleck had attacked b II now had increased forces, made up of South Africans, Indians, Australians and New Zealanders, as well as a strong

#### 1. Operation *Crusader*.

contingent of troops brought back from Greece. For twelve consecutive days, the battle had raged in the area between Solloum and Tobruk. At the end of this hand-to-hand combat, the most violent of the campaign, the Italians were decimated and the Germans had lost two-thirds of their

equipment. It was imperative to replace them as quickly as possible. However, a convoy bound for Tripoli on the night of November 21-22 had failed to cross the Ionian Sea. The ships, attacked by torpedo planes, had been forced to withdraw to Taranto, while the two cruisers escorting them, the *Trieste* and the *Duca degli Abruzzi*, had been seriously damaged by torpedoes.

Eight days later (November 30), a new effort was made to send replacement equipment to Africa. Five ships set sail for Libya. But of the five, only one arrived. Another had to take refuge in the port of Suda, Crete. The last three were sent to the bottom, including the *Mantovani*, loaded with 7,000 tons of fuel oil, as it entered Tripoli harbor. "There's no denying it was a heavy blow," Ciano wrote in his diary that evening.

Admittedly, these blows were hard. They forced the Afrikakorps to count every shell, every drop of petrol. But from another point of view, they made things mature. As a result of these setbacks, the Italians had come to admit what they would never have conceded a few months earlier: that the fate of the African Expeditionary Corps depended on the regularity of its supplies; that this regularity could only be ensured through transit via Bizerte; but that the Bizerte problem presupposed a resumption of contacts with the French government. If this prospect was repugnant to Mussolini's pride, who wanted nothing to do with being a claimant, it was even more repugnant to Ciano's vanity, who dreamed of settling the question by force. Yet the need was there, more and more pressing, and General Cavallero, Chief of the General Staff, repeated gloomily: "Everything now depends on the French ceding Bizerte... Believe me: without Bizerte, Libya is lost.

This situation led the Italian Foreign Minister to consider a meeting with Admiral Darlan. On December 2, he asked General Vacca-Maggiolini, President of the Turin Armistice Commission, to extend an invitation through Admiral Duplat. After careful consideration, Darlan accepted. The meeting was set for December 9, in Turin. But on the 7th, Ciano was still hesitating about how to receive him. Unlike Cavallero, he thought it unlikely that France would grant him the right of passage to Bizerte, unless forced to do so by an ultimatum. And that ultimatum was in his pocket.

The meeting took place on schedule. But contrary to all expectations, Ciano had mentioned neither the passage through Tunisia nor the cession of Bizerte. Not once had these words fallen from his lips. He confined himself to generalities, as if the two men had nothing else to say to each other, so that Darlan left the Madama

Palace wondering why Mussolini's son-in-law had brought him to Turin.

What was to blame for this inexplicable silence? Was it due to the fact that the Italian Admiralty had prepared a major naval operation for December 12, 13 and 14, in the hope of forcing the English blockade? On those days, a powerful convoy was to set sail for Tripolitania, escorted by all the deep-sea vessels in the Italian fleet, with their admirals on board. Ciano had exulted on hearing this news, which had reached him on the eve of the Turin meeting. Had he wanted to know the outcome before playing his cards against France? It was not impossible. But the facts had not lived up to his expectations, for this operation, too, had ended in failure. On December 13, before the convoy had even set sail, two 5,000-ton cruisers, the *Da Barbiano* and the *Giussano*, were sunk in the Gulf of Taranto, along with two large cargo ships, the *Del Greco* and the *Filzi*, carrying over a hundred tanks destined for the Cyrenaican army. Clearly, the British had been warned. As a result, the Italian Admiralty found it more prudent to hold back the convoy and postpone the rest of the operation.

Was it any wonder, then, that Rommel complained that, throughout the winter of 41-42, he had received only 18,000 tonnes of equipment out of the 60,000 tonnes required? Was it any wonder that General Gambara, commander of the XX<sup>e</sup> Italian Corps, was telling anyone who would listen: "The exhaustion of our forces is terrible to see. We are in no condition to resist a new British offensive. We'll come to a glorious end. But there's nothing to stop it being an end all the same"?

Yet Rommel refused to consider the game lost. On December 6, he had attacked in the direction of Tobruk, where the British garrison, supplied by sea, was clinging on. He was forced to abandon the attack by Gambara, who disapproved of the move and withdrew his motorized corps from the battle. On December 9 - at the very moment when Darlan and Ciano were exchanging idle chatter in the Madama Palace - Rommel had to break off the action in front of Tobruk. Frightened by the exhaustion of the Italians and the wear and tear of the Afrika Korps, he wondered whether he could still hold Cyrenaica. Yes, as long as he could clear the enemy and withdraw quickly to Aïn-el-Gazala. On the 12th, Rommel had set up his H.Q. there, but on the 13th, the day the large convoy had been immobilized at the bottom of the Gulf of Taranto, its positions had been turned by the British 4<sup>e</sup> armoured brigade, whose men had shown extraordinary bite since being commanded by General Ritchie. By

December 15, it had become clear that the Axis forces were on their last legs. To escape encirclement, Rommel decided to withdraw to the Derna-el Michili line. This new retreat had aroused great emotion in the "Commando Supremo", especially as Rommel had explained to General Cavallero, who had arrived on the scene on the 17th, that he would probably have to abandon the whole of Cyrenaica in order to attack Aguedabia through the desert. Cavallero didn't object at the time.

But that same day, at 11 p.m., a German-Italian conference was held in Berta, at Rommel's headquarters. It was attended by General Cavallero, General Bastico\*, General Gambara and Field Marshal Kesselring, who had just taken command of the Luftwaffe forces stationed in Sicily. In pathetic terms, Cavallero had urged Rommel not to evacuate Cyrenaica, assuring him that it would be a fatal blow to Mussolini's prestige. For his part, Field Marshal Kesselring strongly supported his Italian colleague, declaring that there could be absolutely no question of him abandoning the Derna airfield. The discussion had been stormy. But Rommel did not allow himself to be shaken by their objurgations.

- Nothing more can be done to change my decision," he said. The orders are out and have already begun to be carried out. If the armored group does not want to be annihilated, it has no choice but to cut a path through the enemy forces during the night. I am well aware that this could result in the loss of Cyrenaica; I am also aware of the political consequences of such a withdrawal. But I'm faced with the choice of staying where I am, sacrificing the armored group and losing both Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Or start my withdrawal tonight, open up a path through Cyrenaica to the Aguedabia region and at least defend Tripolitania. I can only choose the latter solution h

On hearing these words, Bastico and Gambara went wild. Rommel then asked Bastico:

- Since you are the senior commander of the North African forces, tell me what you propose to do about the situation?

But General Bastico evaded the question, and the delegation left headquarters without having made any decisions.

As a result, Rommel began his retreat to Aguedabia. It was carried out under very harsh conditions. You can't imagine what it's like," he wrote to his wife on December 22. I'm hoping to get the bulk of my forces out and stop somewhere. Little ammunition and fuel, no air support. Enemy conditions exactly the opposite.

But could Rommel stop at Aguedabia? Wouldn't he have to

abandon Tripolitania too? This was a possibility he didn't rule out. In that case," he declared, "I'll cross Tripolitania and move on to Tunisia, where I'll continue the fight at the head of my remaining armored troops. Whatever happens, I won't end up as a prisoner of the British!

1. *Op. cit.* I, p. 232.

From then on, the future of the Afrikakorps seemed to lie in these words: "Bizerte or death".

\*

Sometimes at F *Hôtel du Parc*, sometimes at Matignon, I followed the foamy wakes that the Italian convoys traced on the surface of the Mediterranean, knowing that each one brought us closer to the fateful deadline. I was also watching Rommel's retreat. Informed by Admiral Duplat, I knew he couldn't hold out for long in the face of the British attacks. But I had no idea that his retreat would be so rapid, or that it would suddenly assume such proportions.

Suddenly, on December 18, the day after the German-Italian conference where Rommel had exposed the gravity of the situation to Gambara and Bastico, Goering, warned by Kesselring, had sent the following message to Admiral Darlan:

*I would like to speak urgently to the Commander-in-Chief of the French forces in North Africa to discuss with him the situation that would arise if Rommel were forced to enter Tunisia to continue the fight.*

The Reichsmarschall ended his message with these words:

*I would be prepared to receive him the day after tomorrow, December 20, at the Ministry of T Air in Berlin.*

Until November 18, 1941, command of our armed forces in Africa had been entrusted to General Weygand. On that date, he was replaced by General Juin (I have mentioned elsewhere the role I played in this appointment, which the Marshal accepted only after much hesitation).

On receipt of this note, the Marshal and the Admiral quickly consulted each other and decided that I would go to Berlin with General Juin and my other military advisors on the negotiating committee, Colonel Morlière and Captain Caron. Their role would be to examine the military aspects of the problem; mine, to repeat once again to the Germans that any military



assistance was conditional on the conclusion of a political agreement. It was impossible for us to spill French blood in Tunisia and then hand it over to the Italians. We needed a joint declaration in which the Axis powers undertook not to take advantage of the circumstances to make territorial claims on the country, nor to undermine the authority we exercised there by virtue of the Bardo Treaty. (I knew that a wealthy Italian settler in the Sahel had already built a sumptuous villa in the Hammamet region to receive Mussolini).

At 5 a.m. on December 20, Juin, Morlière, Caron and I took off from Le Bourget, bound for Berlin. Juin, who was traveling under the name of Commandant Dupont, was in high spirits. In his briefcase, he had packed the plans for the Mareth Line, which would defend southern Tunisia, so that he could discuss them with Goering.

When we arrived at Tempelhof, after a short stopover in Frankfurt, several German cars were waiting for us at the edge of the runway. A representative of protocol led me to the lead car, while Juin, Morlière and Caron took seats in the next one. When we arrived at the host MrfZon, where an apartment had been reserved for me, I realized that the second car had not followed us. I feared it had taken a wrong turn and reported the matter to the protocol officer.

- It's not a mistake," he replied, "these gentlemen won't be staying at the Hotel *Adlon*, but at the Hotel *Kaiserhof*.

- Why were we separated?" I protested. I'm the head of the delegation...

- The Reichsmarschall has decided to do so. He will receive these gentlemen at the Air Ministry at 11:45 a.m., i.e. in half an hour.

I understood immediately what was happening. We had been intentionally separated, and the separation was symbolic. True to their tactics, the Germans intended to separate military problems from political ones. Goering received Juin, because he considered him a convenient interlocutor. He kept me at arm's length, because he saw me as a troublesome interlocutor. It was the logical thing to do. Juin was "convenient" because, as a military man, all he had to do was provide technical answers to technical questions. I was "awkward" because, as a member of the government, I had to put political conditions first, and these were much more unpleasant for the Italians and Germans to discuss. But what was the point of sidestepping these problems? They remained, whether Goering spoke of them or not.

As soon as I got to my room, I picked up the phone and called Juin at the *Kaiserhof*.

- We're just leaving for the conference," he says.

- I'm fine. I'll need to see you immediately afterwards. It would be best if you dropped by the *Adlon* Hotel on your way out from Goering's. I have a small lounge where we can have a quiet chat.

- I understand.

All I had to do now was wait. I expected them to appear in an hour and a half. Three hours passed. I was beginning to wonder what was going on when they finally announced themselves at around 3.30pm. At first glance, I noticed that their faces were smiling.

- So, how did it go?

- As good as it gets.

- Wasn't it too hard?

- At first, yes," replied Juin. Goering began by talking about the hostage problem. He said he understood the Marshal's emotion...

(His plan to present himself at the demarcation line and take himself prisoner had certainly paid off).

- ... but he assured me that he had checked the list himself and found that they were all terrorists who had already committed some criminal act against the occupying troops or the Marshal's government. None of them could therefore be considered innocent...

(These men were nonetheless dying for acts they had not committed, and those they had committed could in no way carry the death penalty).

- ...then, without transition, he said to me: "I need to know, now, today, what the French government will do if Rommel enters Tunisia? ■

- And what did you answer?

- I said that, in accordance with international law, we had to disarm Rommel as soon as he entered our territory.

- He must not have liked that!

- Yes, he did. He jumped up. What," he cried, "do you imagine a man like Rommel is going to let you disarm him? First of all, you don't know him. Secondly, I can tell you that he has received formal orders not to allow himself to be disarmed. He will continue to fight on Tunisian territory, and that's going to raise some very serious questions for you. If you take up his cause, it will be a breach of article 10 of the armistice agreement, which stipulates: "The French government undertakes not to undertake any hostile action against the German Reich in the future with any part of its remaining armed forces, nor in any other way. This breach of Article 10 will

automatically trigger the application of Article 24: "The present armistice agreement may be denounced at any time by the German government, to terminate immediately, if the French government does not fulfill the obligations assumed by the present agreement." So, I repeat: what is the French government going to do?"

Juin continued: "I told him that this question was beyond my remit, that I had come to discuss military problems, not to say what the political position of the French government would be in such an eventuality. Goering then calmed down and said to me: "Well, since you've come here, let's discuss military matters."

- Was Goering alone?

- No. He had General Warlimont and interpreter Schmidt with him.

Here! Warlimont .

- I pointed out to Goering that we had to look at the problem as a whole, and that in addition to defending Tunisia's southern border, we had to plan for British reactions on Dakar, the Moroccan coast, the Algerian coast, northern Tunisia and, finally, on the Tripolitan coast.

General Juin paused for a moment. Then he continued:

- As far as the Atlantic contingency is concerned, I felt I had to say that the immediate danger was not very great, given the difficulties of landing on the Moroccan coast at this time of year. The coast is not easily accessible, the departure bases are very far away and it is impossible to put powerful breaking gear ashore immediately. Under these conditions, the forces we had been left with in Morocco could be used to drive the enemy (i.e. the Anglo-Americans) back into the sea, even though they were virtually devoid of modern equipment; the same applied to the Mediterranean coast of Algria and northern Tunisia, where, in addition to the difficulties inherent in a landing, we had to reckon with the lesser security of the maritime rear.

- What was Goering's attitude at the time?

- Much more relaxed than at first. He listened attentively, without raising any objections. He only pointed out that the French Moroccan coast was not the only one to be considered, and that a possible landing in the Spanish zone should also be envisaged. I replied that it was my understanding that the Spanish had considerably reinforced the defense of their zone. At this point, General Warlimont confirmed what I'd said, showing us maps showing, in very precise detail, the reinforcements of the

Spanish garrisons.

- That's right," I remarked, "I've heard the same thing from a Spanish source. But these forces are not exactly well-intentioned towards us! Franco is hoping to gain an extension of the Spanish zone in Morocco and part of the Oranie region.

- I know this, and it worries me. That's why I felt I had to say that we French had no interest in the Anglo-Saxons gaining a foothold in the Spanish zone, and that if they did, a kind of solidarity had to be established between us, not to mention reciprocity. On hearing these words, Goering smiled.

- In short, have you considered the various possibilities for a joint defense of the Maghreb quadrilateral?

- There's no way around it: from a military point of view, all these problems go hand in hand. With today's forms of warfare, it's impossible to separate them.

- And Tunisia?

- I'll come to that. Continuing my presentation, I then examined the problems raised by the defense of southern Tunisia. I stressed the need to stop at the old Mareth position, for three reasons: firstly, the economy of forces; secondly, the moral necessity of not abandoning the "Mareth" position; and thirdly, the need to maintain the "Mareth" position.

Tunisia; and finally, because its possession would provide the British with formidable air bases for attacking Sicily and southern Italy.

- But do we have enough resources to contain an English attack?

- Certainly not. Even with the support of the Afrikakorps.

- How much would you need?

- Some thirty battalions, at the very least.

- And how many do you have?

- Brand new.

I was startled to hear this figure.

- Nine of them? But that's very little! How come? I thought Weygand...

Juin smiled sadly.

- What did you want it to do? Nine battalions is the limit imposed by the Italians in their armistice agreement. Even so, these battalions are in northern Tunisia, as the whole of southern Tunisia is subject to the demilitarization regime. First and foremost, these clauses need to be removed to enable us to rearm the Mareth line and concentrate the necessary resources there...

Once again, I saw how incompatible the armistices were with the demands made by the Germans.

- Have you told Goering?

- Of course you can.

- What was his reaction?

- He nodded. Then he said, "I'll have to talk to the Duce about that."

Would Rommel's unexpected retreat free us from our shackles?

- If these clauses were abolished, would we be able to find the staff we need?

- Yes. On condition that they are drawn from Algeria's general reserves, and even from metropolitan France, as long as the army of the Levant has not been reconstituted. But that won't be enough. They would still need to be equipped with modern equipment, staffed by cadres, and staffed by enlisted men retained in metropolitan France - whom the armistice clauses do not allow us to transfer to Africa - as well as destocking weapons under the control of German and Italian commissions...

As Juin spoke, I could see the Rethondes convention being torn to shreds, which was not to my displeasure.

- And then," added the general, "we also need to be able to last, which means replenishing our stocks of solid and liquid fuel, which are currently at an all-time low and barely sufficient to carry out the concentration transports. Our air force would run out of fuel before its bombs were exhausted, and once concentration was complete, our battle corps in southern Tunisia would be doomed to an ephemeral existence. So, in order to last and fuel a three-month battle, we need to top up our security stocks without delay, which represent 50 ( )00 tons of coal and 10,000 tons of petrol. Finally, I added that, for psychological reasons, it would be better for the French to fight alone on their own territory.

- This hardly seems feasible, given that the whole situation is dominated by Rommel's retreat and that he has been ordered not to allow himself to be disarmed.

- Goering immediately relieved him. He declared that Rommel could not be prevented from continuing to fight in Tunisia. To which I replied that the French troops were not unaffected by the conditions imposed by the armistice agreements - I was thinking above all of keeping prisoners in Germany, of the existence of the occupied zone - and that they had to get used to the idea of fighting side by side with the Germans and, a fortiori, with the Italians.

- Very well, then! But if it came to that, would you naturally ask for command-in-chief of operations, should they take place on territory under French authority?

- Well, no. I haven't thought about it.

- It should be done.

- Oh, you know, I'm not making a personal issue of it. As far as I'm concerned, I'd gladly serve under Rommel. It would even be an honor for me, because I consider him a very great soldier.

- I congratulate you on your modesty. Rommel is indeed a great soldier. But, for me, it's not a question of the person. It's a question of principle. What happened next?

- Colonel Morlière and Major Caron outlined the problems involved in defending Dakar. But Goering listened only with a distracted ear. Then he turned to me and said: "Before continuing any negotiations, please pass on the following two questions to the French government, asking them to answer them very clearly:

- 1°) Does he agree with the camouflaged supply of the Afrikakorps via the Bizerte route?

- 2°) Does he agree with the principle of fighting side by side in the event of Rommel's withdrawal into southern Tunisia?

"He added that he was only interested in the Libyan problem at the moment; that if these agreements were not given, he didn't care if Tunisia and the rest of North Africa were invaded. Germany would look at the problem in a different way - and with a gesture he indicated Spain on the map; that, on the contrary, if there was agreement, he would support the Italians in lifting certain armistice clauses and would gladly lend himself to the reinforcements requested.

- Did he back up this statement with threats?

- Not at all. He was quite relaxed. I'd even say amiable. It's the military situation that's tense

- And now, what do you intend to do?

- Return to Vichy as soon as possible to make my report to the Marshal and allow him to answer the two questions posed by Goering. Then I'll go back to Algiers, to organize the resistance on the Mareth line. There's not a minute to lose if we want to be ready in time. And what about you?

- I intend to stay here for another two or three days, to sort out the reopening of our consulates. There are a growing number of French workers volunteering in Germany. There needs to be someone to

look after them in terms of civil status and social assistance.

That same evening, I accompanied General Juin, Colonel Morlière and Major Caron to Tempelhof, from where their plane took off for Vichy.



The next morning, I went to Wilhelmstrasse, where I had an appointment with Mr. von Weizsäcker, the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs. He was still the same courteous, reserved man who had received me with Scapini the day after December 13. I discussed with him the modalities for reopening our consulates, which presented certain difficulties, given that diplomatic and consular relations had not yet been re-established between France and Germany. Thanks to Weizsäcker's interpersonal skills, however, we were able to reach a compromise.

Before leaving him, I took the opportunity to say:

- A meeting took place last night between Marshal Goering and General Juin, Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces in North Africa.

- I know," he replied. It's about the defense of southern Tunisia. It seems, from the report sent to us by General Warlimont, that the two men got on perfectly well.

- I did not attend, as the Reichsmarschall had wanted the conference to remain strictly military in character. But General Juin reported back to me immediately afterwards. It seems, indeed, that things went well. Juin left for Vichy last night, taking with him two questions put to him by Goering, to which he hoped the French government would give him a quick and clear answer.

- Let's hope it's a positive one. It's an opportunity not to be missed.

- As for the answer, I can tell you what it will be, because I know it in advance. I discussed it with the Marshal and the Admiral before leaving Vichy. On the subject of Tunisia, their position is unshakeable.

The Secretary of State seemed interested.

- Can you tell me? It would save time...

- Above all, this will avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Are you aware of Italy's plans for Tunisia? Ciano has sufficiently proclaimed them to the Roman Parliament. Do you think it is possible for us to sacrifice the life of a single French soldier, if we are then to hand over this territory to the Italians? I don't think I'm straying far from Marshal Pétain's thinking when I tell you that military conversations are undoubtedly useful, but that they first require a joint declaration to the

effect that neither Berlin nor Rome intends to raise the slightest territorial claim to this country. This is a *sine qua non* condition.

- I don't blame you. For us, it's hardly a problem: we have no designs on that part of Africa. But for Mussolini, it will be much more difficult. He wants Tunisia, and there's a man close to him who urges him, day after day, not to give up.

- Who?

- Count Ciano.

- Ciano was careful not to mention this to Admiral Darlan when he met him in Turin on December 9.

- There was a reason for this.

- I was told that he had wanted to know beforehand the outcome of the major naval operation planned for the 13th...

- Not at all. It was we who intervened, through M. von Mackensen, our ambassador in Rome. When Ciano invited Admiral Darlan to Turin, it was to present him with an ultimatum. We learned of this through an indiscretion. The Reich Chancellor personally objected. He instructed Ribbentrop to inform Ciano that he would veto the delivery of any ultimatum to Darlan on the Tunisian question. At the same time, he had Rintelen\* confirm our position to Mussolini.

■ Ciano, taken by surprise, was left speechless. He was forced to sheathe his sword...

I now understood why he was so silent and why he had confined himself to generalities. He didn't know what to say!

- The Führer felt," continued the Secretary of State, "that any unwelcome pressure on this issue would have only one result: to tip the French Empire into the camp of dissent...

I didn't mind hearing these words from a high-ranking official on Wilhelmstrasse, and I certainly didn't mind learning that they reflected Hitler's opinion. Admiral Darlan and I had been repeating the argument for so long, it had finally sunk in. I suddenly had the impression that we would soon reap the fruits of our labors.

1. The German military attaché in Rome.

- The Chancellor is right," I told Mr von Weizsäcker. As for you, Excellency, you will easily understand that we would end up with the same result if we committed our African army alongside the Afrikakorps without first obtaining all the desirable guarantees concerning the future of Tunisia.

- Certainly," replied the Secretary of State, shaking my hand. I'll pass



on what you've just told me to Mr. von Ribbentrop.

\*

On my way out of Mr von Weizsäcker's office, I passed a man in his forties, who greeted me in a friendly manner.

- Excuse me," I said, "but I'm not handing you over...

- I'm General Schmudt, the Führer's chief aide-de-camp. We met at the Berghof, when you came there with Admiral Darlan.

I recognized him at once.

- Exactly. But you were in uniform. Today, you're in civilian clothes. I thought you were a Ministry official...

- Me, a diplomat? That's hardly my style..." he retorted, bursting into laughter. I knew you were in Berlin, but I didn't expect to see you. General Warlimont informed me of your presence, in the company of a certain Commandant Dupont...

I couldn't help smiling.

- He made the best impression on her, as a direct, energetic, understanding man. "With him," he told me, "I have the impression we'll be able to get along."

- And what about you? What are you doing in Berlin? I thought you were at headquarters.

- I ran here just in time to do some Christmas shopping for my family. It relaxes me a bit, as we've been through some trying times. Ah, the Russian winter! You don't know what it's like.

- You use the same words as General de Caulain- court.

- How so?

- Caulaincourt was French ambassador to St. Petersburg in 1812. Napoleon, who had decided to invade Russia, had called him to Fontainebleau for consultation. The Duc de Vicence, who was doing everything in his power to dissuade him, had given the Emperor a terrible description of the Russian winter. After a while, Napoleon cut him off, saying: "That's good. I've understood. Basically, winter is the same in Moscow as in Fontainebleau. It's just a lot colder and lasts a lot longer. But that was precisely where the difference lay I

- Indeed ' Winter is always winter. But in Fontainebleau he was a corporal, in Warsaw a general, in Moscow a field marshal! And then, this mud, this deluge of mud! You sink halfway down your legs. Now that the cold weather is here, the ground is frozen. Better for

the tanks. But these polar temperatures - minus 35, minus 40 degrees - make the engines seize up. The army almost disintegrated. Now that the front has stabilized, all danger is over. But we had a narrow escape! No general could have stopped the debacle. Without the Führer's intervention, we were all doomed.

- How did he do it?

- When he read the reports sent to him by army and army group commanders during the second half of November, he realized that the fighters had reached the limit of fatigue and discouragement. They were getting bogged down in the mud and beginning to think that the difficulties of their task exceeded human strength, that the enormity of the Russian spaces would be their tomb. He said to himself: This is not a strategic problem. It's a moral crisis. So he moved into the G.H.Q. telephone exchange and called the commanders of the various units. He didn't just talk to the generals: he went right down to the colonels and battalion commanders. He would have phoned the privates, if he could have reached them. He told them: "I know the difficulties you're struggling with. Better still, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking of Napoleon! But the situation is not the same. As long as I'm here, there'll be no retreat from Russia. Pull yourself together! Hold on to your ground! Hold on until spring! When winter is over, we'll resume our forward march. ■ I can only repeat these words to you: but they don't carry the same weight in my mouth as they did in his. He made hundreds of phone calls in this way. It was the first time in history that the telephone had played this role. It was as if his own will ran along the wires. He restored the fighters' confidence. He galvanized them. No one else could have done it. Little by little, the soldiers recovered. The front stabilized. Since December 4, there has been no sign of any further weakening or retreat. Hitler has single-handedly won a battle fought not against the Soviet army, but against cold, mud, anguish and fear. At the mere sound of his voice, the Wehrmacht rallied. Hitler realized that there was no limit to his power, and that none of his generals could have done the same. That's why he decided to dismiss von Brauchitsch and take command of the troops himself. Since the day before yesterday, he has been the head of I'O.K.H., to establish more direct contact with the base units. I'm sure we won't see the same hesitation again.

\*

On December 23 I went back to Mr von Weizsäcker to finalize the agreement on the reopening of our consulates. I intended to take the night train back to France, as I was anxious to find out what was happening in Vichy. To my surprise, the Secretary of State was not his usual self. He avoided looking me in the face and seemed embarrassed. At the end of our conversation, he said:

- By the way, we have received the French government's response to the two questions put to General Juin by Field Marshal Goering.

- What does it say?

- The Reich Foreign Minister has reserved the right to speak to you himself. He is waiting for you in his office.

Mr von Weizsäcker then took me to his boss, and after introducing me to him, slipped away. Mr von Ribbentrop received me with great friendliness, but there was a sly smile on his lips that told me nothing good.

- The Secretary of State must have informed you that we have just received the reply from Vichy. It was forwarded to us by the armistice commission in Wiesbaden. I thought you might like to have a look at it.

He handed me, without adding anything, two typewritten sheets. I read them slowly. The note read:

*December 22, 1941.*

*On December 21, 1941, on his return from his mission, General Juin reported to Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan on his meeting with the Reich Marshal, attended by General Warlimont.*

*He said that the Reich Marshal had told him that, on the answer the French government would give to two questions, depended the continuation of the conversations:*

*The Reich Marshal asked for precise answers to the following two questions:*

*1° - Does the French government agree to camouflaged transport of equipment and supplies between France, North Africa and Libya, with no Axis personnel involved?*

*2° - If the Afrikakorps had to reach Tunisia, would we accept it fighting alongside us to stop the British?*

*The French government's response to these questions is as follows:*

*The French government answers both questions in the*

*affirmative.*

*As a condition for being able to cope with inevitable British reactions:*

*a) Full military, naval and air freedom in the western Mediterranean: movements, rearmament using equipment and munitions stored or controlled in Africa or France; manpower.*

*b) Release of managers essential to the management of native troops.*

*c) Remilitarization of southern Tunisia.*

*d) Germany supplies fuels and lubricants of all kinds, as and when required, for means of transport of all kinds and, if necessary, for military operations.*

*e) Luftwaffe protection of transport ships in the eastern Mediterranean.*

*The French government is asking the German government to obtain the necessary agreement from the Italian government.*

*The French government drew the German government's attention to the need for General Juin to remain commander-in-chief, if operations were to take place on Tunisian or French territory.*

*Finally, and without making this a condition, the French government emphasized that the effectiveness of all these measures would be multiplied if the political, economic and financial climate were improved by German initiatives to mitigate, as far as possible, the armistice regime.*

I kept my composure, but felt myself blushing to the roots. So, in forty-eight hours, the Marshal and the Admiral had renounced the essential: they were virtually handing over Tunisia to the Axis powers, without first demanding a formal renunciation of their claims to the country! I couldn't believe my eyes. I reread the note a second time. The conditions requested were strictly confined to the military sphere (in fact, they corresponded to what Juin had told me, and took into account my observation on command-in-chief). But the last paragraph seemed overwhelming:

"Finally, and *without making this a condition*, the French government stresses that the effectiveness of all these measures would be multiplied if the political climate... were improved by *German initiatives* mitigating, as widely as possible, the armistice regime. ■

How humbly and on bended knee these things were said! And this, at the very moment when we were on the right track, when everything was converging to ensure the success of our position and justify, not an "attenuation", but a profound revision of the armistice's clauses I Didn't the Marshal and the Admiral understand what I was trying to do? Didn't they realize that by doing so, they were breaking the main beam holding up the whole negotiation? What was the point of fighting as I had done to obtain the signature of the additional protocol, of opposing General Vogt to a categorical *non possumus* as long as the political conditions were not fulfilled, of writing my note of July 14 asking for the armistice to be replaced by a new statute? to undergo the rigors of a state of tension, only to let go at a time when we seemed on the verge of reaping the fruits of our efforts, and when we had every right to hope that we would be able to erase the most humiliating conditions of our defeat? Yet all this had been discussed at length between the Marshal, the Admiral and myself; nothing had been undertaken without their agreement, including our very firm position on Tunisia, which had been the subject of a discussion no more than five days earlier. I didn't understand what had happened. But I suddenly felt disowned and humiliated. All the more so as Ribbentrop was watching me out of the corner of his eye, a sarcastic expression painted on his face.

Wanting to keep my composure, despite this note which - in the Chinese sense of the word - made me "lose face", I gave him back the sheets, saying with a smile:

- Perfect. It's a great success for Marshal Goering.

As a result, his face darkened.

- All the more so," I continued, "since this note puts an end to the state of tension you had me notify on July 15 by Councillor Achenbach. That's your opinion, isn't it?

Ribbentrop hesitated for a moment. I took the opportunity to say:

- Tell me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that maintaining the state of tension is incompatible with a joint fight by our African army and Rommel's armored corps?

- Of course!" replied Ribbentrop, a little annoyed. A new situation calls for new adjustments.

- Thank you for telling me. In any case, you can see how right you were to advise Ciano against the use of force.

- Ah? Did you know?

Faced with his surprise, I didn't think it necessary to tell him where I'd got this information from.

- Now the door is open for further conversation. We parted with

these words.

\*

I arrived in Vichy the next evening, in a very bad mood and determined to have a frank explanation with Darlan.

- How do you expect me to stand firm for positions you abandon without even warning me? The note of December 22, written during my absence and given to me by Ribbentrop to read while I was in Berlin, put me in a terrible quandary. I didn't know what to say. You and I have worked hand in hand up to now. If this is no longer to be the case, I prefer to withdraw.

- Now, now, don't get your self-esteem in an uproar! I swallow a lot myself.

- It's not a question of self-esteem: it's a job badly done! I'd have liked to see you on the Wilhelmstrasse saying that nothing was possible until Italy gave up its designs on Tunisia, and then receiving a similar denial the next day!

- I agree. But you were in Berlin and it was impossible for me to notify you by telephone. Our conversation would have been listened in on...

- But why the sudden change of course?

- It's quite simple. As soon as you left, we received alarming news from Libya. We were told that Rommel was withdrawing to Souerat. If so, he could arrive at the Tunisian border any day now. But nothing was ready. Juin told me that he needed at least ten days to set up a position along the Mareth line. The situation was becoming dramatic. If we had made obtaining reinforcements dependent on the outcome of a political negotiation, the details of which would necessarily have taken much longer, we would have ended up with a terrible mess. I preferred to let go of the ballast to allow Juin to put in place the reinforcements it wanted.

- Now I understand. But you have to admit that from a distance... Especially as Rommel is still at El-Agheïla...

- That's right. The news of his withdrawal to Tripoli was premature. But it led us to believe that danger was on our doorstep. We had to act as quickly as possible.

Darlan's arguments don't seem convincing to me. I'm not angry. But what is said is said. There's no need to go back over it...

However, Rommel seemed to be holding on to El-Agheïla. Since December 22, he has not backed down. And his very presence in the

depths of Syrte, combined with the threat he continues to pose to Tunisia, is making things mature. They are forcing people to understand the need for these "adjustments" of which I have spoken.

Ribbentrop, and I personally hope that they will be as bold and far-reaching as possible - and not simply a "softening" of the armistice, as the note of December 22, written, it seems, a little too hastily, put it. Events seem to be moving in this direction.

On December 23, Ribbentrop instructed M. von Mackensen, his ambassador in Rome, to go and see Ciano to ask him what he would think of a three-way meeting with Admiral Darlan, during which certain political problems would be discussed. Ciano, who had not yet given up on dictating terms to France, reluctantly replied that "such a meeting could not be harmful, nor even useless, provided it remained strictly informative". But at the same time, his entourage spread the word that he was resolutely hostile to this procedure.

On December 26, Germany was back at it again, this time with Mussolini. Through Rintelen, Germany made it clear to the Duce that it was time for general negotiations. Mussolini, well aware that this was Hitler's wish, proved more pliable than his son-in-law. He instructed General Vacca-Maggiolini to prepare political talks with the French in order to obtain their authorization to use Tunisian ports. Ciano could not hide his disappointment on hearing this news. "The thing surprised me all the more," he wrote in his diary, "as nothing of this kind has yet been decided and Mussolini told me, only a few days ago, that Vacca-Maggiolini was a fool who should not concern himself with politics." These words tell us just how far apart their views are. But the news from Libya will make them agree.

From the 29th, the Italo-German formations still clinging on to Halfaya and Bardia were hard pressed. If they gave up, as Cavallero feared, Rommel would no longer be able to hold on to El-Agheila. He would have to start another withdrawal. On the night of December 29/30, the Chief of General Staff went to the palace in Venice, where he drew the Duce's attention to the gravity of the situation.

So Mussolini resigned himself to the inevitable. On December 31, he wrote to Hitler:

*Führer,*

*Four months have passed since I had the good fortune to see you at your headquarters. In the meantime, many things have happened about which I'm anxious to speak to you personally.*

*But there are two extremely urgent issues to which I would like to draw your attention:*

*Libya. - The battle that has raged in Cyrenaica over the last few weeks has ended without winners or losers. We would certainly have had the upper hand had we been able to bring to bear the men and material resources we needed to energize the battle.*

*It was at sea, not in the sands, that the outcome was compromised. The loss of an entire convoy of seven boats on November 9 had serious consequences. On December 14, the loss of two boats carrying German and Italian tank units was no less damaging. They were sunk by a submarine in the Gulf of Taranto.*

*The last convoy of four ships arrived safely. But to protect its journey (the convoy represented around 20,000 tons) we had to employ 100,000 tons of warships. This represents such an expenditure of fuel that supplying the resistance in Tripolitania alone becomes prohibitively expensive - unless we inaugurate a route via Tunis, which would be infinitely more economical...*

*To avoid the dangers that the future seems to hold, to enable us to preserve Tripolitania and regain the initiative, the question of bases in Tunisia becomes absolutely fundamental.*

*I don't need to demonstrate to you the immense advantages that would flow from the full use of the Tunisian bases. I can assure you that the Axis strategic situation would be completely reversed. While our movements of troops and material would meet with almost no obstacles, the enemy's communications would be literally strangled. The consequences would be incalculable - just as incalculable as the loss of Tripolitania would be for us.*

*There are only two ways to achieve our goal of free use of certain French bases in Tunisia: consent or force.*

*Naturally, every effort must be made to reach an agreement. France will give nothing for nothing. It will make counter-proposals, demanding a change in the armistice conditions and military facilities for its defenses. I absolutely believe that the game is worth the candle. Through these Tunisian bases, we can bring to Africa the forces needed to resume our push towards Egypt and, if necessary, to cooperate with the French in repelling possible reprisal operations in Morocco.*

*If the French reject even the most generous offers, I tell you,*



*Führer, I'd rather lead my divisions and tanks to Tunisia than see them disappear at the bottom of the sea on the road to Tripoli. Generally speaking, I think we need to find a way of clarifying France's attitude towards us. I'd be happy, Führer, to hear your views on this subject.*

It was about time. On the same day, the German-Italian rearguards defending Bardia were surrounded. On January 2, having exhausted their supplies and ammunition, they surrendered. 300 tanks, 14,000 prisoners and numerous vehicles fell into British hands...

The crisis was now approaching its climax. Every day made Rommel's position more precarious. And, as a consequence, each day brought us closer to the fateful deadline - the deadline I hoped for more than I dreaded, because it would enable us to emerge from our enslavement. Oh, I knew it wouldn't be peace yet. But an important step had been taken on the road to it. All the news that reached me reinforced my foreboding: the coming week would be decisive.

Suddenly, my premonition was confirmed.

On January 9, 1942, Abetz, who had hurried home from headquarters, telephoned me at Matignon to ask me to come and see him urgently. The meeting, which began at 12:30, did not end until 3:45.

- During my stay on the Russian front," the ambassador tells me by way of preamble, "I had the opportunity to have three conversations with the Chancellor. It's the first time I've been able to talk to him about French problems at such length and in such depth. I found him more open to these questions and more understanding than on previous occasions. He must have given it a lot of thought over the last few weeks.

(I'm not at all surprised: the events in Cyrenaica must have had something to do with it).

Abetz then reviews the three main theaters of operation: North Africa, Russia and the Far East.

General Rommel, he told him, had recently received large convoys of reinforcements and supplies by sea, whose arrival had changed the

balance of forces. At one point, it would have taken just 50 additional tanks to restore the situation. Today, he is regrouping his forces and should be in a position to resume the offensive within a fortnight. But he won't, because his plans are different. Until further notice, he will remain on the defensive. As a result, there is every reason to believe that the questions raised by Marshal Goering no longer arise.

After all, maybe it's true. Rommel hasn't moved in forty-eight hours. He's still lurking at the bottom of Syrte. But, on the whole, nothing has fundamentally changed in his situation: the British still have control of the sea, and the Italo-German supply lines are as threatened as ever. So I greeted Abetz's words with a certain amount of skepticism. What happened yesterday could happen again tomorrow. Besides, would Abetz be here, telling me this, if the Tripolitan front no longer inspired any apprehension? I prefer to think that if the Führer has asked him to tell me these things, it's because he doesn't want to appear to be acting under the influence of necessity. This is a preoccupation common to all dictators.

Abetz then moves on to the Eastern Front. What he tells me only confirms what I already know: the mud, the snow, the cold, the floating German units in front of Moscow and Leningrad, the suffering of the combatants, the lack of winter equipment, a psychosis of discouragement in front of the immensity of the Russian plain. When he assures me that the Eastern Front has been stabilized since December 4, and that the Wehrmacht will resume the offensive next spring, I readily believe him, as this echoes what General Schmundt has told me.

More interesting are the indications he gives me on the Far East front.

- If the British knew what awaited them in the Far East," the Führer told me, "they wouldn't have much to cheer about. The Japanese have done for their navy what the Russians have done for their motorized army. They have built ships in secret, far beyond what the British and Americans can imagine. The tonnage at their disposal surprised even me. After taking Guam, Midway, Hong Kong and the Philippines, they will march on Singapore. Once Singapore has fallen, which will happen very soon\*, the Japanese will occupy Burma to cut off the route by which Chiang Kai-shek receives his supplies. After that, they will take action in India. Not a military occupation: that would be too costly. Instead, they would simply bring in weapons, in order to fan the flames of hatred between Hindus and Muslims. As a result of this rivalry, the Indus

and Ganges valleys will soon be ablaze. If England wants to hold on there, it will have to reinforce its garrisons by taking units from its army in Egypt. But whatever she does, she will be overwhelmed. Britain will receive a serious psychological shock when it feels that the Indies are beginning to slip away from it.

■ Simultaneously, Admiral Nagumo \* will seize Trincomalee, control Ceylon and completely dominate the Indian Ocean. Nothing would stand between him and Suez. By spring, the Japanese will be masters of the Persian Gulf. By then, I myself could have resumed the offensive on the Russian front, with a more powerful army than in 1941. Not in the direction of Moscow and Leningrad, possession of which would only have the effect of putting huge masses of people on my hands, for whom I would have to provide sustenance. My offensive will be directed towards the Caucasus, behind which lie the world's greatest riches. My armored divisions will go all the way down to the Persian Gulf. We will join forces with

1. The fall of Singapore was scheduled for February 15, 1942, one month later.

- Chuichi Nagumo (1887-1944). Japanese admiral. His name remains attached to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the Japanese defeat at Midway in June 1942.

the Japanese in Basra. At this point, the great British imperial artery will be cut off.

Abetz pauses for a moment, seeming to concentrate his thoughts.

- It was useful for you to know the Chancellor's views on the current state of operations and their future course," he continued gravely. But what I have to tell you is even more important. Listen carefully. The Chancellor said to me: "I am prepared to examine the French problem in depth and to offer a very broad solution, if France proves itself worthy of it. I would have preferred to talk with France at a time when the military situation would be clearer, as many minds are troubled by the fluctuations on the Russian front and this is likely to make it more difficult for the French government to take a stand."

The ambassador pauses again. Then he continues:

- The Führer has sent me to Paris to ask you a question, or to ask you to ask Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan on his behalf. I'd be grateful if you could give me their reply by next Monday at the latest, as I have to leave as soon as possible for headquarters, where the Chancellor is waiting for me. Please note that he is not asking for an irrevocable commitment from you: he is only asking for a response in principle to the following questions:

"Is France prepared to walk hand in hand with me to the end of a conflict from which a new world will emerge, on the understanding that the following four points will have been discussed and will have found a solution satisfactory to both parties?

1°) A profound modification of the current Franco-German status;

2°) Outline of the future peace treaty;

3°) An in-depth study of the military, economic and financial resources France would need to successfully meet its new obligations;

4°) The mode of presentation most favorable to French opinion.

"If the French government responds positively to these questions, Admiral Darlan and some of his closest collaborators, including yourself, will be invited to come to headquarters to continue the discussion.

"If France wishes to join me loyally - and I quote the Führer's words verbatim - I am prepared to grant her a peace treaty that will astonish the French. If not, I'll make other arrangements. But right now, I need to know where I stand.

At the time, I was so surprised that I could hardly believe my ears. "A profound modification of the current Franco-German status" - i.e. revision of the armistice agreement, definition of the broad outlines of the future peace treaty, i.e. fixing our position in Europe; all this debated in the course of a negotiation to find a mutually satisfactory solution to these various problems - this is more than I had dared to hope for, more than I had advanced in my note of July 14th! I'm not afraid to say it: my heart leaps in my chest and, deep down, I give Rommel a grateful salute. What an incalculable service he will have done us! Above all, don't let him move! Let him stay where he is, crouching like a fox at the bottom of Syrte...

It seems to me that all the efforts the Admiral and I have been making since our visit to Berchtesgaden are finally coming to fruition. What exciting prospects! Our prisoners freed; the metropole delivered from the yoke of occupation; our empire intact; our links maintained with our African possessions; national reconstruction finally taking off - and God knows there are things to be done in this field... It's almost too good to be true; I can hardly believe it!

Yet I keep my cool and don't let anything of my inner state show. Especially as there are one or two points I'd like to clarify.

- The Chancellor said to you: "Is France prepared to march with me? Does he mean that we declare war on England and the United

States? I'm certain in advance that the Marshal will not accept this.

- Rest assured. There is no question of it. Any intervention by France would be determined by mutual agreement, taking into account its current capabilities. Under no circumstances would they require total or partial mobilization. Operations would be limited to Africa, and could be carried out by colonial troops, backed up by volunteers, technicians and professional soldiers. The fleet will naturally have a role to play in resolving the Mediterranean problem.

- One more question: the Chancellor also said he was ready to define the framework of the future peace treaty. Can you give me a brief outline?

- You're asking too much. The Führer reserves the right to bring them to the Admiral's attention himself, should he visit headquarters. On the other hand, there is one thing I can tell you: M. von Mackensen, our ambassador in Rome, was summoned to headquarters while I was there, to make his report. His conclusions are that Italy is willing, which is a great step forward, because until now the Italian leaders have always been hostile to any in-depth examination of the Franco-German problem.

- Thank you for your communication. I shall be leaving for Vichy this very evening to pass them on to the Marshal.

- Don't forget I need the answer by Monday. And let's hope it's positive, because I doubt the Führer will renew his offer.

I return to Matignon, where I write down the questions Abetz has just asked me, so as not to make any mistakes in transmitting them. With the comments on the various theaters of operation, this makes a fourteen-page report.

The next morning, I arrived at the *Hôtel du Helder*, headquarters of the Admiralty, where I asked to be received immediately by the Vice-President of the Council. I must have a strange expression, because the Admiral, as soon as he sees me, says:

- Just looking at you, I can tell there's something new!

I simply pull the memorandum reproducing Abetz's words from my briefcase and hand it to him, without uttering a word. The Admiral reads it. When he reaches the last page, he makes no secret of his satisfaction. He says to me:

- Magnificent!

His eyelids crinkled, like a sailor on his dinghy looking for the

horizon.

- We're finally out of the tunnel! I'd given up hope. How did you manage to get all this r

- I didn't get anything. I'd like to be able to boast about it, but that wouldn't be true. It was events that worked for us and brought Hitler out of his silence.

The Admiral opens his eyes wide. I've never seen them shine like that. He stands up, comes over to me and gives my hand a long shake.

- It's very good, my little one, it's very good," he said in a low voice.

Then, after a moment's silence:

- It would be madness to pass up such an opportunity! Let's go and inform the Marshal immediately.

A phone call to *Y Hôtel du Parc* to inform the head of state of our arrival. A few moments later, we're in his office.

- Mr. Benoist-Méchin had a most interesting conversation with Ambassador Abetz yesterday. He has just brought me the minutes. Allow me to read it to you.

- Let's hear it.

The Marshal straightens up, leans back in his chair and clasps his hands together, those calm, robust hands that have always impressed me. As the Admiral continues his reading, I watch him attentively. He's very upright, more "Nous, Philippe Pétain, Maréchal de France" than ever. His face is inscrutable. I've never seen a more majestic old man.

When the Admiral has finished, the Marshal tells him:

- If I've understood correctly, Hitler is asking us to march with him until the end of the conflict?

- Yes.

- This really isn't the time...

- Why?

- Because the German army is facing serious difficulties in Russia.

- That's right," I remarked. There was a worrying lull during November. But since December 4, the situation has been restored. I have it on very good authority.

- But that's not what a report I have here says.

- What's the connection?" asks the Admiral. I'd like to know the origin.

- It was issued by Major Baril of the Second Bureau.

The Admiral gets carried away.

- Why wasn't it given to me, and why was it sent to you without my knowledge? As Minister of Defense, I should have received it first. I don't like this kind of secrecy.

A slight blush rises to the Marshal's cheeks.

- Did you intend to prevent me from reading it? he said icily.

It's the Admiral's turn to look embarrassed.

- What will you think? But there are tendentious files all over the place, put in front of you with the intention of influencing you...

- Would you question the competence of the Second Bureau?

The Admiral doesn't know what to say. This is a painful discussion. I'm trying to put some oil in the wheels.

- I think, Mr. Marshal, that we're straying from the subject. The competence of the Second Bureau is in no way in question. No one would deny that the onset of winter put the German army in a critical position. But I believe that it is precisely these difficulties that have led Hitler and Mussolini to become more conciliatory towards us. We keep asking them to make concessions. Do you think they are willing to do so when they feel in a position of strength? Let's give thanks for the difficulties that make them more reasonable. But let's not hope for Stalin's victory. That could cost us dearly!

- Certainly, certainly," retorts the Marshall. But Hitler's questions are no less demanding.

- No one is asking you to make a hasty decision. Today is Saturday. Abetz doesn't expect an answer until Monday. So we have forty-eight hours.

- There are times in life when you have to make up your mind," grumbles the Admiral, who still hasn't digested his fight from earlier.

In reality, I understand the Marshal's attitude. It is dictated by his exclusively defensive temperament. He is reluctant to commit himself in any direction. This is what irritated Foch in the past. I can't help thinking what the attitude of a Lyautey would have been in this instance, with his fiery imagination and his taste for brilliant, rapidly executed initiatives. I imagine that he would have leapt at Hitler's proposal, that he would have taken the opportunity to raise the debate, to shout to Germany the phrase he had been repressing since 1918 and which he repeated to me shortly before his death: Let's do away with these absurd quarrels between neighbors. The world has become too small!

But that's not in Marshal Pétain's nature. He thought for a long moment, then said evenly:

- All things considered, the decision before us is a serious one. I

don't want to make it alone. I will convene the Council of Ministers tomorrow.

The following day, January 11, was a Sunday. Most of the ministers were absent from Vichy. It was impossible to get them together in time. But Messrs Moyssset and Romier\*, Ministers of State, Bouthillier, Minister of Finance, and Pucheu, Minister of the Interior, were present on the banks of the Allier. The Maréchal decides to call a meeting of these ministers. Around 4pm, we gather around a green table in the small salon adjoining the Maréchal's office.

As soon as the meeting opened, the Marshal asked me to read my memorandum. Then he addresses the ministers present and says:

- Did you hear what Mr. Benoist-Mechin just said? I'd now like to hear your opinion, as I'm sure you appreciate the importance of the decision to be taken. The Vice-Chairman has the floor.

- For my part," says Admiral Darlan, "I see the question posed by the Reich Chancellor not as a new choice, but as the culmination of my efforts. For the first time, the Franco-German problem is posed in its entirety and in the form we ourselves have sought to give it.

The Admiral briefly reviews the various stages in the negotiations: the agreement of May 5, 1941; the visit to Berchtesgaden

Lucien Romier (1885-1944). Chartist, director of *Le Figaro* before the war. Advisor to Marshal Pétain from early 1941. Minister of State from August 1941 to December 1943.

(May 11); discussion of the Paris protocols (May 25-27)i ; signature of the additional protocol, making the granting of military facilities conditional on political advantages (May 28); summary note of June 7 and request for a new meeting with the Chancellor; notes of July 14, advocating a thorough review of the armistice status; Saint-Florentin meeting (December 1<sup>er</sup> ); visit by General Juin to Marshal Goering (December 20); note of December 22, 1941.

- All this," continued Darlan, "represents a methodical effort, stubbornly pursued in the same direction. Call it the policy of collaboration, if you like. I'd prefer to call it a policy of national recovery and European integration, because that's what it's all about. Day after day, we told the Germans: "You're asking us to collaborate with you? But it's up to you to give us the chance. First of all, we need to solve two essential



problems:

- 1°) Free us from the shackles imposed by the armistice agreements;
- 2°) Tell us what place you intend to reserve for us in tomorrow's Europe.

"So far, we've received nothing but dilatory responses. That's why we're still waiting.

"Today, the situation has changed. What is Hitler proposing? A profound modification of the armistice statute and the definition, in broad outline, of the future peace treaty, through negotiations aimed at finding a mutually satisfactory solution to all outstanding problems. This is exactly what we have been calling for. Are we going to refuse it, now that we've been offered it? That would be to deny everything we've done so far. I don't even conceive that we could say "no" to a proposal whose effect would be to erase, to a large extent, the consequences of our defeat and bring us out of our defeated condition.

The Admiral's presentation is brief, sober and clear. It contains no emotional elements. That's its strength.

- And what do you think?" asks Pucheu.

- As far as I'm concerned," replies the Minister of the Interior, "I think we need to simplify things and say to ourselves that we're faced with this alternative: what will happen to us if we say yes? What happens to us if we say no?

"If we say yes, the Admiral will be summoned to headquarters. There, a negotiation will begin, which, if it is to be serious, will necessarily require the presence of the Italians and Spaniards. But agreeing to negotiate does not mean subscribing in advance to the adversary's conditions. We remain free to accept those that suit us, and to reject those that do not. Doesn't the final agreement depend on finding a satisfactory solution to all the points at issue? If someone wants to impose unacceptable conditions on us, there's nothing to stop us breaking off talks. Saying yes in no way compromises our freedom of action.

■ To say no, on the other hand, is to place ourselves in a situation that could quickly become catastrophic. It will be the Italians in Tunisia and, perhaps, the Spaniards in Morocco. It will mean the metropole being subjected to an increasingly harsh regime - which will lead to God knows what heartbreak, because Hitler, believe it or not, won't be doing us any favors. It won't be a revision of the armistice in the sense of its alleviation, but its aggravation, perhaps even the suppression of the French administration to the benefit of

the German military administration. I'd rather not think about what will happen on that day.

"So I'll say yes to the Chancellor's proposal, because to answer no would be to opt for the policy of the worst.

- And you," says the Marshal, turning to Bouthillier.

- Me, Monsieur le Maréchal? answers the Minister of Finance, I see things from a slightly different angle, no doubt because I'm the only one here present to have been at your side in the government that signed the armistices of June 1940. Remember the tragic days of Bordeaux, when everything was going to hell and we didn't even know if the Germans would grant us a suspension of arms! The whole country turned to you in a great surge of hope, because you pulled it out of the war. Since then, it has maintained its confidence in you, because it knew that all your actions were dictated by a concern to alleviate its misfortune. Today, we are being asked to take another step in the same direction. In all conscience, I don't think we can refuse.

The Marshal, I feel, was more moved by what Bouthillier just said than by Darlan and Pucheu's presentations. This is because the Minister of Finance has a great influence on his mind, and has brought back memories of events that have had a profound effect on him.

- I've listened to you, gentlemen, with rapt attention," he says in a deep voice, but one in which I discern a shudder that wasn't there before. Yes, Bouthillier is right. I pulled France out of the war, with all its misery and devastation. That's also why I don't want to plunge it back in: that would be to fall from Charybdis into Scylla. But one thing worries me. The Chancellor's proposal has certain advantages. But it also imposes new obligations on us. He's asking us if we'd be willing to march with him to the end of the conflict. What does he mean by this? That we declare war on England and America? I would never do that, for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that the powers conferred on me by the National Assembly do not include the right to declare war. I'd like to get a clearer picture of Hitler's intentions before committing myself further. What do you think?" he adds, addressing me.

- It would be foolhardy of me," I replied, "to claim to know Hitler's intentions. But since you've asked me the question, Mr. Marshal, I'll try to answer it, not on the basis of hazardous hypotheses, but on a certain number of facts.

"There was a time, I'm sure, when Hitler would have liked to have

France on his side, with its entire army, air force and fleet. But he knows full well today that this is neither materially nor morally possible. Our air force, already outclassed in 1940, practically no longer exists. Our army is reduced to 70,000 men, including the gendarmerie. Our armaments, largely obsolete, are stored under German-Italian control. As for the nation, it has received a shock from which it has not yet recovered. It is fundamentally opposed to the idea of taking up arms again. No doubt a certain number of volunteers could be recruited. But any mobilization - even partial - seems to me to be out of the question.

"Hitler knows nothing of this state of affairs. He experienced defeat in 1918. He knows that it took Germany twenty years - despite the military qualifications of its people and its enormous industrial potential - to rebuild an army capable of meeting the demands of modern warfare. An army cannot be improvised overnight. To believe that France can go to war in its current state is a fantasy. I don't think Hitler was naive enough to share this illusion. And even if he did, his generals would be quick to point out to him that, in order to get the French army back on its feet, it would be necessary to supply it with so much equipment that the Wehrmacht's armaments would have to be reduced accordingly.

"So, what could it be? I refer here to Abetz's comments, as they appear on page 12 of my memorandum: "The initiatives that France would be led to take would not be of such a nature as to require total or even partial mobilization." I ask you: is there a war today that can be fought without any form of mobilization? No. These would be limited, defensive operations, mainly in Africa, likely to be carried out by the forces we already have, reinforced by volunteers, technicians and professional soldiers. Their objectives would be either to defend territories under our authority, or to recover those that have been taken from us. Although their defense is not one of the obligations of the armistice, it seems to me to go without saying. There is no reason why we should allow pieces of our empire to be snatched away one by one without reacting.

■ In addition, there was the problem of the Afrikakorps' retreat, which was still a possibility, and the joint defense of Tunisian territory. Its various aspects were discussed at the June-Goering meeting. We have already given our agreement in the note of December 22, 1941. There is therefore no need to return to it.

"In all this, I'm looking in vain for something imprecise and obscure. To refuse to face up to the negotiation that Germany is proposing to us would be to demonstrate a singular lack of

confidence in ourselves. But I wouldn't be expressing my thoughts fully if I didn't add, in conclusion, that at a time when the whole world is going through one of the most formidable convulsions in its history, I don't see much of a future for those who stay in their armchairs and refuse to take any risks. If we don't seize the opportunity to rise from our lowly position just when it's within our grasp, we can expect a younger, more ardent France to rise up and sweep us away.

Messrs Moysset and Romier - those ancient Romans - nod in agreement. They too felt that the answer had to be in the affirmative. The ministers present were unanimous.

- That's good," says the Marshal. I think we've covered everything. Since you are all in agreement, I authorize Benoist-Méchin to say yes to the Chancellor's proposals, but with the caveat that under no circumstances will I plunge France back into war.

We part on that note. I go up to my office to finalize the notes I've taken during the deliberations. Time to submit them to the Admiral, to check that they correspond to his thoughts, and to get on the plane. At 10:30 p.m., I land at Le Bourget.



The next day is Monday, January 12. In the early hours of the morning, I telephone the German Embassy to inform Abetz of my return and to arrange a meeting. He's so insistent on the urgency of his reply that I'm surprised to hear him say he can't see me until 4pm.

- You asked me to hurry, because you had to return to headquarters immediately," I couldn't help but notice. I took your request into account. How come you've given me such a late appointment?

This lack of eagerness seems unusual.

- My return to headquarters has been postponed. I'm due to visit the Chancellor in the company of M. von Ribbentrop. He has just returned from Budapest. He needs to stay in Berlin for two or three days, so I won't be leaving Paris for forty-eight hours.

I have to believe him. But his argument is only half convincing. Everything about him, starting with the tone of his voice, which I find a little hesitant, gives me the impression that the wind has changed.

At 4 p.m., I arrived at the agreed rendezvous. I immediately tell the ambassador that the French government's response is positive. I expect him to welcome this news with satisfaction. Not so. Last Friday, his

voice was vibrant and joyful. Now it's dull and embarrassed. The contrast is too marked for me not to notice. Something must have happened during my three-day absence. But what was it?

- You tell me that the French government's decision is affirmative," he says, "but what do I mean by that? Has the Council of Ministers been heard?

- No. It was a Sunday. Most ministers were absent. But the question was discussed in depth at a restricted Council chaired by the Marshal and attended by the Admiral, Messrs Moysset, Romier, Bouthillier, Pucheu and myself. The decision was taken unanimously. You can therefore take it for granted.

"However, the Field Marshal has asked me to make it clear that, while he is favorably disposed to defensive operations in Africa - to which we have already committed ourselves in our response to Field Marshal Goering's questions - he will under no circumstances allow himself to be drawn into declaring war on England or America. Such an eventuality is out of the question. Not only would he be overstepping his mandate, but the vast majority of the French population would not support him. They have neither the means nor the desire to take up arms again. He wishes to emphasize this, in case the Chancellor has a different view.

- Don't let the Field Marshal worry," says Abetz, leafing through a sheaf of papers on his desk. Here is the shorthand account of one of my conversations with the Chancellor. I'll read you the relevant paragraph.

- Reich Chancellor: In all conscience, do you think the French people are prepared to go to war with England?

"Abetz: No. The French people are tired of war. They are no more willing to fight England than they are to take up arms against us.

"Reich Chancellor: That's my feeling too.

"You see that on this point everyone is in agreement. Now I'm going to send a telegram to Ribbentrop to inform him of the French government's response. Would you like to help me draft it? I was not present at the Vichy deliberations and would like it to conform to the decisions taken there.

- Please.

Abetz sits down at his desk and writes out the telegram. When it was finished, he gave it to me to read. I make a few minor changes. But then I make a monumental mistake: I forget to ask him for a copy or, more precisely, to confirm the contents in writing. This omission, as we shall

see, was to cost me dearly.

If I insist somewhat heavily on this phase of the negotiation - to the point of diminishing its dramatic interest, but what I'm writing here is not a literary exercise: it's a relationship involving responsibilities other than my own - it's because during my trial before the High Court in June 1947, President Noguères presented the members of the tribunal with the text of a telegram sent by Abetz to Ribbentrop on January 12, 1942\*. This dispatch contained, among other things, the following passage:

*"I asked Benoist-Méchin whether the French government would be prepared to declare war on England and the United States, should the technical conditions be established to enable France to wage a victorious war against the Anglo-Saxon powers.... The deliberations (which took place in Vichy on January 11) resulted in a unanimous decision to declare war on England and the United States, after clarification of the preliminary questions I had mentioned to Benoist-Méchin".*

I jumped at the words. No, I say frankly, because declaring war on England would have seemed particularly criminal to me. After the aggressions we had suffered at Mers el-Kébir, Dakar and in the Levant states, I felt we had little to spare towards a former ally who was so unsympathetic to us and so deliberately sacrificing our interests to hers. But even taking these factors into account, I would have opposed it, because I considered such an undertaking materially and psychologically unfeasible. I had even described it as a figment of my imagination.

It wasn't this that provoked my indignation. It was the fact that the telegram in no way corresponded to the questions I had asked.

-Cf. Appendix no. 2. that Abetz had asked me, nor to the Vichy deliberations, nor to the reply I had reported to Rue de Lille, nor to the telegram Abetz had drafted in front of me for Ribbentrop, the text of which he had asked me to review. However, I was not the only one involved: through me, the version presented by M. Noguères reached the Marshal, the Admiral and all those who had taken part in the Restricted Council. I felt caught in a

trap that I couldn't explain to myself. Not only had I never said these things, but I couldn't have said them. All it took was a minute's thought to realize this.

It was agreed that, if Vichy's response was positive, the Admiral would be invited to go to headquarters to continue the discussion. As the answer was affirmative, the Admiral was about to be summoned any day now. What would have happened if the Chancellor, convinced that the French government had undertaken "to declare war on 1 England and America", had put Admiral Darlan on notice to carry out his promise? Even without going that far, was it possible for the discussion to continue without the Chancellor even hinting at it? In either case, my deception would have been exposed. Believe it or not, I wasn't stupid enough to put myself in such a situation.

So what had happened? Serious writers, studying this period of Vichy history with the sole aim of clarifying this enigma - I'm thinking above all of Robert Aron - have come up with a whole series of hypotheses on the subject. None of them, in my view, corresponds to reality, and I would have told them so had they consulted me. For me, there are only two possible explanations:

First explanation: the telegram Abetz had sent to Ribbentrop was indeed the one I had reviewed. However, it had been manipulated after the fact by Soviet officials who had been the first to inventory and decipher the Wilhelmstrasse archives.

It's the easiest explanation. And yet, I don't think it's the right one.

Second explanation: I pointed out the difference in Abetz's demeanor between my interview on January 9 and the one on January 12. As lively and radiant as he was at the first, he was dull and embarrassed at the second. I had the feeling that something had changed. Perhaps he had reason to believe that Hitler's proposals - to which he attached so much importance - would not be followed up, and that Admiral Darlan would not be summoned to headquarters? So the deliberately measured nature of my message seemed too dull to hold the Chancellor's attention and counterbalance the influence of those members of his entourage who remained hostile to any discussion with France. Wanting to force the chance he had thought he held in his hands, which seemed to be slipping away, he substituted another, more forceful dispatch for the original text, designed to incite the Führer to enter into negotiations against all odds. Knowing Abetz, and knowing that he

felt he had to do the impossible to "enhance" his role in Paris in Hitler's mind, and dissuade him from imposing excessively harsh peace terms that would sooner or later have led to a new conflict, it was this explanation that I finally accepted. What I don't quite understand, however, is why he felt he had to choose an argument to convince the Führer that he himself didn't believe in, and in which the master of the III<sup>e</sup> Reich had always been reserved.

I don't blame my judges for making this telegram, in which I had no part, one of the main reasons for my conviction. Anyone in their place would have been mistaken, unless they had a favorable prejudice towards me (which could not have been the case), or had known me well enough to know that the maneuver they attributed to me was not in my nature.

I don't blame Abetz either, for I know the very high motives that prompted him to act in this way, and the ardor he has always put into defending the causes of Franco-German reconciliation. So, when the stenographic accounts of my trial appeared in volumes, I simply sent him a copy with the following dedication:

*To Otto Abetz  
so that when he reads this book, he'll know that my hell was  
paved with his good intentions.*

But back to January 1942.

Having informed Abetz of the outcome of the Select Council's deliberations, there was nothing to do but wait for Hitler's reply. But as I had noticed that the ambassador was suddenly showing less haste than before, and as I knew that the Admiral was impatiently awaiting the invitation to go to the main headquarters (for his credit was beginning to wear thin in the eyes of the Marshal, and he needed a success to restore his reputation), I felt I had to warn him that things would perhaps proceed less quickly than might have been expected. So I wrote to him as soon as I got back from Rue de Lille:

■ Abetz told me that we should beware of any untimely haste: that, for his part, he thought it would not be long before the negotiations entered an active phase; but that it was also possible that the Chancellor wanted to give himself time for reflection. He stressed that, in any case, the moral benefit to France would be considerable; that the mere fact of having answered in the



affirmative, at a time when some German leaders were inclined to think that the French response would be dilatory, because of the situation on the Russian front, would not fail to impress the Chancellor favorably."

This "invitation to wait" greatly disappointed the Admiral. But, contrary to what might have been expected, it disappointed the Marshal even more. At first, he had been somewhat reluctant. The stagnation on the Russian front and America's entry into the war had increased his circumspection. But as the days went by, it became clearer to him just how much we could gain from the Führer's proposal. Now he was getting nervous and, more often than not, his cheekbones were flushed. I'd never seen him like this. He, the timer par excellence, suddenly seemed in a hurry to get things done. A little vexed, too, at not having received an answer. I could see that the Embassy's silence was worrying him, for he kept asking me:

- So, still no news?

- Still nothing, sir.

- You see, there's a certain General de Gaulle on the radio in London. He claims to be liberating France, as if I didn't exist. It's humiliating in the long run! I'd like to prove to the French that we don't need him, that we're perfectly capable of liberating ourselves without plunging France into another holocaust.

That's why I'm looking forward to the negotiations. Do you know him?

- Who?

- De Gaulle.

- No. But it was a close call. At the time he had just published his *Armée de métier*, I had been very struck by it and wanted to meet him. I mentioned it to the manager of the Berger-Levrault bookshop on boulevard Saint-Germain. I asked him if there was a way to see him. He replied: "You're wasting your time! We're his publishers and we know him well. His books are interesting. But he'll never get anywhere. He's too proud. So I gave up.

- Did they tell you that? Yes, we did. His intelligence is remarkable. I expected a lot from him. But his pride is immeasurable...

And after a moment's silence, he added with a sigh:

- What a pity... It's a snake I've warmed in my bosom...

Wanting to encourage me in my efforts, he had the thoughtful idea of giving me a bronze medal in his effigy. It was the only favor he could grant me, as the French government had decided not to award any honorary distinctions - except for acts of war - until the end of

hostilities. I received it with great pleasure. It was accompanied by the following letter:

*Vichy, January 23, 1942.*

*Mr. Secretary of State,*

*At the beginning of 1942, Le Maréchal wanted to present you with a medal bearing his effigy.*

*Material difficulties prevented us from receiving it in time. It is with some delay, for which I apologize, that I ask you to find enclosed the medal intended for you.*

*Yours sincerely*

*For the Marshal of France  
Head of State and by his order The Head  
of the Secrétariat particulier*

*B. Ménétre.*

Unfortunately, the gift of this medal wasn't enough to get things moving. I phoned Rue de Lille from time to time. But Abetz was away, and his replacements always gave me a wooden face. At the same time, Darlan was stepping up his efforts in Turin, through Admiral Duplat.

- It's really curious," said the Field Marshal. The Reich Chancellor has asked me some very important questions. His ambassador asked me to provide him with the answers within three days. I expressly convene a restricted Council. I give him the answer within the agreed time. And then nothing happens. It's hardly polite! Please, insist on clarification from these gentlemen...

Any clarification? What was happening was clear. But to understand it, you didn't have to turn to Rue de Lille or Turin. You had to look to the Mediterranean.

Field Marshal Kesselring's entry into the Mediterranean theater of operations marked a turning point in the Battle of Africa. When the new commander-in-chief of the southern sector had arrived at Rommel's headquarters on December 17 to take part in the Italo-German Berta conference, he had been dismayed to see the situation in which the expeditionary corps found itself. Rommel was talking of retreating through Tripolitania and continuing the fight in Tunisia? He couldn't even afford to do that! Fuel reserves were

practically exhausted. If he had remained motionless at El-Agheïla, it wasn't for lack of fighting spirit: he couldn't go forwards or backwards. We now know that he had an ocean of oil under his feet. But we didn't know it then. He was reduced to pumping his last diesel resources into the bunkers of a single freighter stranded on the desolate shore of Sirte. Kesselring immediately concluded that the entire Afrikakorps would soon be nothing more than a gigantic battleship stranded in the desert, if the supplies it needed were not delivered as quickly as possible.

Back in Sicily, he had considerably strengthened the II<sup>e</sup> air fleet stationed there and set about neutralizing Malta, that hornet's nest from which bombers and torpedo boats intercepted convoys. Having drawn Goering's attention to the importance of the island and the need to land there, he had subjected it to a veritable bludgeoning. Day after day, he had the Stukas of the II<sup>e</sup> Messina air group pound the island, rendering the runways of the three airfields there unusable and multiplying low-level raids to destroy aircraft on the ground with machine guns. This was followed by attacks on hangars, fuel depots and port facilities in Gozzo and Valletta. The results of these attacks were soon felt: Malta was put out of action indefinitely, and an increasing number of convoys succeeded in crossing the Straits of Sicily. Thanks to Kesselring's offensive, the percentage of ships sunk had fallen from 80 to 25%.

On January 5, in particular, a large convoy arrived in Tripoli without suffering any damage. A second did the same around the 15th. Thanks to them, Rommel had received 55 tanks and 20 armored cars, as well as a considerable quantity of ammunition and fuel.

55 tanks was not a lot, and Gambara had begged Rommel not to undertake any action until he had received more. But Rommel was boiling with impatience. All the more so as he had instructed Colonel Westphal, his Chief of Staff, to make a reconnaissance flight over the British positions. From the top of his *Fieseler-Storch*, Westphal found, to his surprise, that the British lines were practically bare. Apparently, the British did not imagine for a second that Rommel could attack them in the situation he found himself in.

Back at Rommel's headquarters, Westphal informed his boss of his discovery and advised him to take immediate action. Rommel didn't need to be told twice. He immediately decided to resume the offensive, without waiting for new reinforcements to arrive. To maximize the element of surprise, he found it preferable not to reveal his intentions to the Italians.

That same evening, he attacked from Mersa-el-Brega. The following day, January 22, Aghedabia was recaptured. Rommel had captured 117 tanks or armored cars, 35 guns and numerous vehicles. He had also taken over a thousand prisoners, as the British had been caught completely unawares. Wanting to take advantage of this situation, Rommel made a bold move. Rushing towards the Saounou supply center, where the British had amassed vast supplies, he seized it almost without a fight. A huge quantity of food, ammunition and petrol had fallen into his hands. He was now strong enough to continue his advance without great risk. The routed British forces were pushing back eastwards, and two new convoys had arrived in Tripoli.

On January 29, El-Mechili, Benghazi and Derna were recaptured. On February 5, the whole of Cyrenaica was liberated. The British rearguards were entrenched in Tobruk. The Afrikakorps seemed to go from strength to strength. It had already crossed the border into Marmorica. Egypt was once again within its grasp...

Ah, how I wish Juin had been at Rommel's side, that he too had taken part in that lightning advance! I could see him bursting into Egypt like a new Bonaparte, winning the Battle of the Nile and advancing all the way to Damascus to reclaim Syria, via Saint-Jean d'Acre and Jerusalem.

All it would have taken was for Rommel to retreat as far as Tunisia. But, at the last minute, fate had decided otherwise.

For the further east the Afrikakorps advanced, the more convoys arrived in Tripoli under the protection of Kesselring's aircraft, and the more the transit via Bizerte lost interest, the more remote was our chance of a negotiated peace. Mussolini had written to Hitler a month earlier to tell him that it would be advisable to open wide-ranging negotiations with France to obtain the right of passage through Tunisian ports, and to assure him that "the game was worth the candle". How he now regretted it! What he wouldn't have given not to have written that letter! *Passato il pericolo, dimenticato il santo!* Ciano was triumphant, playing the matamore and multiplying his efforts to persuade the Germans to abandon their project, without realizing that nothing had been settled, that everything remained in abeyance until Malta had been taken, until a valid

agreement had been reached with us, and that the Afrikakorps risked finding itself, one day or another, facing the same difficulties as those it had encountered during its first offensive...

The more Bizerte lost importance, the more excessive seemed to the Axis leaders the conditions we had set for its use. The Führer does not in any way want to accept the conditions set by Vichy for putting the Tunisian ports at our disposal," Ciano wrote in his diary on January 20. He's right, these are draconian conditions. I have never doubted his intentions in this respect. And on January 29 he added: "Goering is skeptical about the possibility of an agreement with France, which misses no opportunity to nibble away at the armistice while remaining, at heart, irreducibly hostile."

While these events were unfolding in Rome and Africa, Admiral Darlan was beginning to lose patience in Vichy. On February 5 - the very day Rommel had completed the reconquest of Cyrenaica - he had asked me to go to Rue de Lille to obtain, at all costs, an answer from the Germans. So I went to the embassy, where I was told, once again, that Abetz was away, that he was still detained at headquarters and that we'd have to wait for his return to find out more.

This time I was angry.

- Your prolonged silence is taking on an offensive character," I said to Councillor Schleier. The Chancellor asked us a number of questions. We answered them in the affirmative, and for the past three weeks you've left us in limbo! This situation cannot continue. We need to know where we stand. Contact Abetz at headquarters. Let him know that his silence deeply hurts the Field Marshal. We, too, have arrangements to make. If I don't have an answer by midnight tonight, the Admiral will draw the necessary conclusions.

My warning must have worked, because at 5pm I received a phone call from Matignon: it was Councillor Schleier, asking me to come and see him. He had received a message from headquarters which he wanted me to read.

When I entered his office, he was all smiles.

- We've just received a telegram from Abetz," he tells me. It must have crossed your path this morning.

Did he want me to believe that Abetz's answer had nothing to do with my admonitions? It was a bit thick.

He handed me a typewritten sheet, headed "Translation". I read:

*February 5, 1942*

*The position taken on January 10, 1942 by the leading figures of the French government was conveyed by me to the Führer and to the Reich Foreign Minister at headquarters.*

*As a thorough preliminary examination of this question is necessary before it can be discussed by the governments concerned, the preliminary conditions for its possible settlement are currently being discussed at the Führer's headquarters.*

*It seems to be the wish of the Reich government to enter into conversation with the French government only when such a conversation with the French government has been sufficiently prepared to yield practical results.*

*Abetz.*

I returned to Matignon without comment and took my head in my hands. There was no mistaking it: despite its evasive form and diplomatic wording, this reply was a rejection. All hope of a negotiated peace was fading on the horizon, as were the foamy wakes traced on the surface of the sea by the Italian convoys...

Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed by a great weariness. I had thought that the 1 Axis leaders had finally realized what was really at stake in the negotiations, that they were following a vision of the future, that they wanted to give Europe an organic basis. I had to face the facts: they had only acted tactically and under the pressure of events. As soon as the danger faded, there was no question of anything. They regretted having given in to what they saw as a moment of weakness, and immediately returned to their old positions, based on national pride and the will to power. They couldn't help it. And it was distressing \*.

The very day Schleier handed me this note, Ciano wrote in his diary: "Now that the pendulum swing of the Libyan armies is to the detriment of the British, the Vichy government is hastening to lavish us with smiles. But we must consider this government for what it is worth - which is not much."

It was the donkey's kick. History would prove that he didn't know how to give others.

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## II

### THE VEILED DRUMS



CHAPTER XVI

AN UNEXPECTED *INTERNATIONAL*

(February 1942)

*I dine with the Maréchal, on the first floor of Y hôtel du Parc, with du Moulin de Labarthète and Admiral Fernet. The latter is a bit of a hunchback and reminds me of Dullin in the role of Volpone. After dinner, the Maréchal pulls me by the sleeve and says:*

- Please come with me. I'd like to show you something.

To speak face-to-face with the head of state is already a privilege. But to be invited by him into his living room at such a late hour is an insignificant favor. It's 10 o'clock in the evening. That's the time he usually goes to bed, and everyone knows that he's militarily punctual in these matters. Only some important event could have led him to make this departure from his usual routine.

We take the elevator. Once upstairs, we enter his office. Contrary to my expectations, he doesn't sit at his desk, but in one of the two armchairs in front of it, and invites me to sit in the other. For a long moment, he remains deep in thought. Not knowing what he wants to tell me, I remain silent. Suddenly he breaks out of his silence.

- No matter how hard I try," he says, casting a disillusioned glance around him, "I just can't get used to this room.

- It's true that it's not big...

- I don't blame him for that. I know how to make do with very

little. But this faux-Empire furniture is just awful. Look at these palmettes and these keyholes!

I would have preferred something simpler, less pretentious.

He's in an excellent mood and seems to have no desire to go to bed. I point out to him that, since there can be no question of him staying at the Elysée, this decor represents the minimum that the French head of state can surround himself with.

- What do I need all this for?" he replied. I'm a farmer's son. Cauchy-la-Tour was far from luxurious. But I was happier there.

- The circumstances weren't the same either...

- Here," continues the Marshal, "everything is fake, everything is trompe l'oeil, and you're bored to death. Always the same people, the same faces. When they open their mouths to speak to me, I know in advance what they're going to say. What monotony! I miss my apartment in the Square de Latour-Maubourg. I also miss Chantilly, where I lived for a while. What a magnificent setting, with its harmoniously balanced lawns and shades! I've never been one for luxury, let alone pomp, but I do like to have a well-ordered landscape around me. It brings clarity to my thoughts. In Vichy, you're crammed in on top of each other.

- Yes, we live elbow to elbow, stacking files in washbasins.

- It's true, it's true. The other day, having taken the wrong floor, I opened the door of what I thought was an office. What did I see? A typist typing something or other on her typewriter. Her typewriter lay in front of her on a small portable table. As for her, she was sitting on a bidet. I recoiled. I thought she was typing a letter while washing up. But she didn't flinch. She said: Come in, Mr. Marshal! Don't be shy. See the conditions we work in here!

"As much as I don't care for pomp, I thought it lacked decorum. I asked her what she was typing. She replied: "The Constitution. I said, "You've got some good ones. She must have misunderstood, because she blushed and said, lowering her eyes, "Pleated dresses are deceiving. I've lost a lot of weight since the armistice". As I could see she was in a delirious mood, I wanted to banter with her. Finally she said to me: "If you stay any longer with me, teasing me like that, I'm going to get in trouble with the Maréchale!" How?" I said. The Marshal? Jealous? At her age!

The Marshal is clearly enjoying himself. I'm a little less

amused, as I keep wondering what he's getting at.

- You told me earlier that you had something to show me...

- Let's leave it at that. There were two South American diplomats downstairs who insisted on talking to me about the meat market. I know them. They're as dull as rain. I wanted to lose them...

This admission reduces to its proper proportions the insignificant favor I thought I was the beneficiary of.

- Well, that's that, sir. Now, with your permission, I'll retire.

- No, no, no, no, no. Stay a little longer. I'm never bored with you.

That's a lot more flattering than even a small favor.

- Here at *Y Hôtel du Parc*," declares the Marshal, "we're not too shabby, given the harshness of the times. Yet there's only one place where I feel at home. Would you like me to show it to you?"

- With pleasure, Mr. Marshal.

He moves to the back of his office and opens a door. We cross into the Restricted Council Room, where an oblong table covered with a green carpet is spread out. This is where Pierre-Etienne Flandin received me on January 11, 1941, when I spoke before La Ferté-Hauterive. It was here, on January 11, 1942, that the deliberations on the questions posed by Abetz took place. What will happen there on January 11?

The Maréchal opens a second door and ushers me into a room I've never seen before. This is his bedroom (the Maréchale lives separately, in an apartment reserved for her at the Hotel *Majestic*). It is connected by an interior corridor to *Y Hôtel du Parc*.

- This is where I sleep," he says laconically.

The walls are completely bare, except for a gold-fringed tricolor pennant hanging over the fireplace. Against the far wall, I can make out a cot, similar to those used by cadets at Saint-Cyr. The furniture consists of two gray-green metal canteens on folding stands, a small table and a chair. A prisoner would have no less.

- That's all I've got," says the Marshal, "and that's more than enough for me.

One of the two canteens is open. There, neatly folded, I see a horizon-blue jacket with seven stars glittering on the sleeve, and

a marshal's baton on top.

Despite the tasteless pastries running along the ceiling, the room is impressively bare. What glory is contained within these four walls! The commander-in-chief's pennant and the insignia of victory... What more could you wish for?

I'm repeating here, because I've learned it by heart, the text Paul Valéry has just sent me, which is soon to appear in a collection of tributes to the Maréchal:

"Who could have told me, on January 22 1931, as I left the Academy session where I had the honor of welcoming our new colleague, that the great career I had just celebrated was far from over, that its most tragic phase and its most eminent point had not yet been reached, that the highest military dignity, the dazzling glory of Verdun, the command of all French forces at the most critical and decisive hour were only a kind of preparation for more extraordinary destinies, to more poignant ordeals, to a much higher authority, and that finally, ten years after that day, a total defeat of France would force my illustrious recipient to take on a burden of crushing weight, of essential importance, that of a nation whose edifice is crumbling, whose forces are giving way, and which has only an old soldier left to maintain some unity and preserve some future. "

That's exactly it... There's nothing to add or take away from this majestic sentence, so long that I wonder how anyone could say it out loud without stopping to catch their breath... It's true that the Maréchal's life was long, too. I look at the little iron bed against the wall. It seems very hard for a man who will soon be eighty-six.

- Do you sleep well in this bed?

- Wonderful! It's the one I had at my Souilly H.Q. during the Battle of Verdun. I'm used to it. When I was young, a fortune-teller predicted that I would die in a cot. It's possible after all...

- Ah!

Will the Marechal pour out his heart to me? I'm careful not to raise my voice, so as not to interrupt his train of thought. But he won't. He senses his mortal enemy approaching: emotion, and evades it by changing the subject.

- By the way, I now know what I wanted to show you. It's a gift from Admiral Leahy.

- U.S. ambassador?

- Yes. He sent it to me just before he left, from President Roosevelt. It's a radio. A brand-new model made over there. You can listen to broadcasts from all over the world. It doesn't need to be adjusted by hand. It's all automatic. You press a button and it's ready.

- And if you want to change jobs?

- Press another key and the device automatically sets itself to the desired wavelength.

- That must come in handy!

- Yes. Come and see him. He's in my office.

We return to the Empire salon. The Maréchal leads me to a pedestal table on which Roosevelt's gift sits. It's a block of varnished rosewood with a row of ivory keys on the front. The Marshall looks at it with obvious satisfaction. He looks like a schoolboy who has just received his New Year's gift.

- It's indeed a beautiful toy," I said.

- Can't we? But we can also make it work. What would you like to hear?

- *I don't* know... Radio-Vichy?

- Oh no! We hear it enough all day long. Choose something else

- I don't care. N'importe quoi...

The Marshall presses a key at random. A gurgling sound is heard. Suddenly, an *Internationale* bursts through the room, sung at the top of its lungs by the chorus of Stakhanovist workers from Moscow's Dynamo factory.

Three hundred men singing in unison makes a lot of noise. I expect the Marshal to reduce the volume of the

1. America's entry into the war led to the suspension of diplomatic relations between Washington and Vichy, and consequently to the recall of Admiral Leahy.

sound. But he's a bit hard of hearing, and the noise doesn't seem to bother him. He follows the hymn with that diligent air I've seen him wear on other occasions. Suddenly, he starts beating time and humming. Then, turning to me, he says

- It's very beautiful, the air of *the Internationale*, don't you think? Come on, do as I do: sing along," he says, nudging me. *L'Inter-nationaaaaale se-ra le genre humain.*

I obey. Here we are, side by side in front of the post, like duettists at Bobino. The Maréchal is delighted. I wonder how he

can bear the rest:

*And if they insist, these cannibals,  
on making heroes of us,  
We'll teach them that our bullets  
are for our own generals.*

he who had to put down the mutinies of 1916. He sings more and more off-key, but still beats time.

- It's a pity the words are so awful, I can't help noticing... Hate that talks is hard enough to bear. But hate that sings!

- As they sing in Russian, it doesn't matter," replies the Marshall, "we can't understand them.

Suddenly, the door swings open.

- Philippe, Philippe, you're crazy!

It's the Maréchale. She's wearing a rosewood crepe de Chine bathrobe and curlers. She's usually smiling. Today she looks like an angry housekeeper.

- You wouldn't think of making such a racket in the middle of the night! You've woken everyone up. The guard is on high alert. They're searching every floor for the person responsible. *The International* at the *Hôtel du Parc*! Can you imagine? What a scandal! Stop this at once!

- It's just that I don't know how to do it," replies the Marshal with a falsely contrite air.

- So let's get a specialist... Let's put an end to this ear-splitting racket... At least mute it...

- Do you know how to do it?" asks the Marshal with a knowing wink.

- Well, no, I don't know anything about this kind of equipment.

Wouldn't it be simpler to press another key, to change the wavelength and silence Radio-Moscow? I'll try. But nothing! The device seems to be stuck...

- We looked everywhere to find out where it was coming from," continues the Maréchale, raising her voice in an attempt to dominate that of the Stakhanovists. We could imagine anything, except that it was coming from your house. And then, when we located the source, a gendarmerie officer came knocking at my door...

- Who? Colonel Barret?" asks the amused Marechal.

- No, it's not. It was someone else. I was in bed. He said to me through the door, "The Marshal is in his study." I replied: "What's so extraordinary about that? Have you come to wake me up for this? Then he said: "Yes, he's singing! - Well, let him sing, if it makes him happy! It doesn't happen that often... - But if you only knew what he sings! - What's that? Speak up! - He's singing *the Internationale!* - *The Internationale?* At the time, I thought I'd gone mad. - In that case, I'll put on my bathrobe and go and see what's going on." I get here and what do I hear? *The Internationale*, indeed. Imagine that! Tomorrow, all Vichy will be talking about it. What am I saying, all of Vichy? We'll be lucky if they don't comment on it in London, Washington, Berlin...

As she spoke, the silhouette of half a dozen Republican Guards loomed in the doorway. The Marshal catches sight of them and frowns. The joke, which had started out as nothing, was beginning to take on excessive proportions. Time to put an end to it.

- Is there a radio operator among you?" asks the Marshall in a firm voice, addressing the guards.

- I'm Staff Sergeant Pellegrin," says one of them, breaking away from the group and standing at attention.

- Then, Sergeant Pellegrin, please disconnect this device. It's suddenly gone haywire.

I admire his presence of mind.

Staff Sergeant Pellegrin strides through the living room and disconnects the device. Splash! Suddenly, *l'Internationale* disappears.

- Thank you very much. You may withdraw," said the Marshal to the guards with unflappable calm.

- Philippe, you gave me a terrible fright," said the Maréchale as the guards disappeared. For a moment I thought you'd been murdered, and that the murderer had switched on the camera to cover the sound of his escape. It's nearly midnight. Time for bed...

- To think that we can never rest easy," grumbles the Marshal with an air of exasperation. There are times when I wonder if I wouldn't have been better off staying in Cauchy-la-Tour!

He must have been hinting at something I don't know, but which must have a precise meaning for the Maréchale, because when she hears these words, she turns pale, opens and closes her mouth without being able to utter a word. Then she bursts into tears and collapses into an armchair.

- Allons bon, allons bon!" said the Marshal with a distraught air, patting her cheeks. Annie, Annie... You know I was only joking...

Then, turning to me:

- Be a good boy and go and tell Doctor Ménétrel. Tell him the Maréchale isn't feeling well. But don't tell him about *the international*. I prefer to keep it between us...

As if that were possible!



CHAPTER XVII  
AUTOPSY OF A DEFEAT  
(December 1943)

It's been almost fifteen months since I left the government and took a break from public affairs. It's been a pleasure to return to my usual occupations. They consist of filing my notes, writing to my friends and listening to music. I hardly see anyone. My life appears to me as an avenue, sometimes crowded with noisy people, sometimes silent and deserted. A beneficial alternation that allows me to take stock and prevents me from considering any state as definitive.

During my stay in Vichy, I saw a lot of Germans. My job required me to do so. Since then, to keep things simple, I've refrained from seeing any of them. The only visitor I had was Hans Ebinger, a soldier who worked at the telephone exchange in the Rue du Louvre and who, before the war, had translated into German the first two volumes of my *History of the German Army*. I have since been told that he was killed on the Eastern Front. My thoughts are with him as I evoke his figure here.

So I was all the more surprised to receive a telephone call the day before yesterday from General Schmundt, Hitler's chief aide-de-camp. I first saw him at the Berghof, during my visit there on May 11, 1941, accompanied by Admiral Darlan. Then a second time in Berlin, the day after the Juin-Goering meeting. Along with General Warlimont and Major Engel, he is one of the members of the Führer's immediate entourage for whom I have the greatest sympathy.

- I'm in Paris for a few days," he says. I'd love to see you, on a

personal level. Where could we meet?

I suggest the lobby of the Hotel *Terminus*, not far from where I live.

- I'd prefer somewhere more discreet," he replies.

What could he possibly have to tell me that requires so much caution? I hesitate for a moment. Finally, I ask him to come to my place. An appointment was made for today, at 4 o'clock.

When he rings my doorbell, I open it myself and usher him straight into my office. Without getting bogged down in preliminary considerations, he gets straight to the point of his visit.

- Do you still intend to pursue your *History of the German Army*?" he asks, pointing to a stack of files piled up on a shelf in my bookcase.

- Of course it is. But it's an overwhelming job. I feel like this story will never end.

- That's fine. That's why I came to see you.

This remark worries me. Does he intend to impose a control on me? Needless to say, I wouldn't accept it... But I'm wrong.

- At first glance," he tells me, "it may seem odd that a Frenchman should write this book. But on closer examination, it's preferable. There's a lot a German wouldn't be able to say...

t When someone wants to tell you something important - and this seems to be the case - I know never to interrupt. So I remain silent.

- As the Führer's aide-de-camp, I can assure you that I witnessed many extraordinary scenes that no one will ever know about, and without which many aspects of the war will remain incomprehensible. I'm thinking in particular of the three meetings between Hitler and General Paulus during the battle of Stalingrad. I've never witnessed more dramatic interviews. I'm a soldier. I could die any day now. It would be a shame if I disappeared and no trace of me remained...

- But aren't there any minutes of these meetings? I thought all Hitler's conversations were stenographed.

- Yes, when it comes to staff conferences. Not always when discussions take place face-to-face. As I said, there were three meetings. Two of them were the subject of minutes. Not the third, of which I was the only witness. Of course, I'll write about it one day in

my Memoirs. But that won't be for a long time, if ever. So I thought it would be a good idea to share them with you, so as not to be the sole repository. You may find it useful for subsequent volumes of your work. I only ask two things: not to publish them before the end of hostilities, and not to cite the source of your information.

- You have nothing to fear," I reply. It will be years before I get to the volume that will deal with the Russian campaign. I'll have to wait until most of the official archives are published, which won't happen overnight. As for not divulging my source, I give you my word.

(Unfortunately, General Schmudt was right in thinking that he would never write his memoirs. He was seriously wounded by the bomb that exploded at headquarters on July 20, 1944, and died a few days later as a result of his injuries. So today I feel free of the commitment I had made to him).

- But tell me," I continued, "one thing surprises me. To what do I owe this vote of confidence from you? I can't think why...

The general then spoke of me and my work in such flattering terms that I would be reluctant to reproduce them here.

- Well, I'm listening. But let me have a pencil and paper.

After concentrating for a while, Schmudt then tells me the following story:

- Around November 22, 1942, when the Russian armies commanded by Generals Wassilewski, Vatutin, Jeremenko and Rokossowski surrounded the German forces, the core of which was the VI<sup>e</sup> army, its leader, General Paulus, climbed into his *Fieseler-Storch* and drove to the main headquarters. Introduced to Hitler, he gave him a detailed account of the situation, which he concluded with these words: "My Führer, if you authorize me to withdraw immediately, I am determined to break the Russian encirclement and make a breakthrough to the southwest, saving all manpower and equipment. But we have to move fast: the Soviet stranglehold is tightening. In a few days' time, such a breakthrough would be impossible. \*

"Hitler thought about it. Then he called in Goering and Bodenschatz h He showed them a map and asked them if the Luftwaffe was in a position to ensure the supply of the VI<sup>e</sup> army until such time as General von Manstein could go and deliver it at the head of new forces he was gathering in the loop of the Don.

"Looking at the size of the encircled perimeter, Goering asked:

'How much food and material would have to be transported? - 700 tons a day," replied Paulus. Goering grimaced. - That's a lot! Couldn't you get away with less? - 500 tons would be the bare minimum. - If I pay the price, I'll make it my business," declared Goering, in a confident tone. General Zeitzler, who attended the meeting as Chief of the General Staff, expressed some reservations, proving that Goering was overestimating the Luftwaffe's capacity. In the end, the figure of 500 tonnes was retained.

"Hitler then turned to Paulus and said: 'The VI<sup>e</sup> army acts as a lock. If it jumps, the Russians will rush to Rostov. The von Manstein Army Group and the von Kleist Army Group will be in peril. We'll have to evacuate the Donetz and the Caucasus. The Donetz is coal, and the Caucasus is oil. We absolutely need it to continue the war. What's more, it will be a blow to German morale. These days, war is no longer a matter of pure strategy. There are a host of other elements, all equally decisive: the economy, industrial production, psychology, all of which I have to take into account. Finally, by holding on to Stalingrad, you've immobilized seven armies on the spot.

#### 1. Luftwaffe Chief of General Staff.

soviets. This is the measure of the importance of your task! That's why I'm ordering you to stand your ground, without retreating an inch. Every day you win is a victory. With that, the VI<sup>e</sup> army commander returned to his post.

General Schmudt pauses. I ask him if he wouldn't like something to drink. He replies:

- I'd love a glass of water.

I serve it to him. He takes a few sips and resumes his story:

- In the last days of December, the weakest links in the German defense cracked. These were the VIII<sup>e</sup> Italian army and the III<sup>e</sup> and IV<sup>e</sup> Romanian armies. The size of the entrenched perimeter was halved. Paulus climbed back into his *Fieseler-Storch* and made his second trip to the main headquarters. He told Hitler: "My Führer, the situation has worsened since our last meeting. Russian pressure is intensifying. If you allow me to withdraw now, I'll still be able to save the men, but not the equipment, which will have to be abandoned on the spot after being rendered unusable. However, this

withdrawal will offer great advantages. It will shorten the front, and the 280,000 men you will recover will enable you to resume the offensive in other sectors."

"A second time, Hitler sent for Goering. He showed him the new perimeter and asked if Luftwaffe planes still had room to land there or drop supplies. ■ It will be difficult, Goering replied. - I'm not asking if it's difficult," replied Hitler, glaring at him, "I'm asking if it's humanly possible. Goering hesitated. Then, when he saw the Führer's gaze, he straightened up and replied: "My Führer, the Luftwaffe will make it a point of honor to carry out this mission!

"Addressing Paulus, Hitler said: "Did you hear what the Reichsmarschall said? The Luftwaffe will supply you. Go back to Stalingrad. Don't give in an inch. Wherever the German soldier is, there he stands, and no force on earth can drive him out. Fight to the end of your strength. It won't be long before Manstein comes to rescue you.

"Paulus returned to Stalingrad. This was around January 20<sup>1</sup>. The winter, which had been harsh, became even harsher. The temperature dropped to 35° below zero. Snowstorms redoubled in intensity. You couldn't see 20 meters in front of you. Luftwaffe planes circled in the fog, but couldn't land because visibility was zero. The soldiers, for whom they represented the supreme hope, could hear the engines rumbling above the clouds. It was as if they were separated from the earth by an immense sheet of frosted glass. Then the rumbling grew fainter and faded into the distance. Silence.

"In the meantime, the perimeter had shrunk even further. Pitomnik air base fell to the Russians, who seized the last of the cargo parachuted in by Luftwaffe aircraft. All links were now severed between the VI<sup>e</sup> army and the outside world. Food supplies were becoming scarce. Ammunition was running out. There was no more medicine or bandages. The wounded had to be abandoned to their fate. The intense cold aggravated the wounds. Thousands of men froze to death.

■ The soldiers had entrenched themselves on the banks of the Volga, in blocks of ruined houses and in the rubble of the old tractor factory. They were still fighting with whatever they could get their hands on: rifle butts, iron bars, concrete sleepers. By January 24, the situation had become desperate. The head of the VI<sup>e</sup> army sent the following message to headquarters:

*Troops without ammunition or supplies. Only*

*fragments of six divisions accessible. Signs of disintegration on the southern, northern and western fronts. No command coordination possible. Eastern front without significant changes. 18,000 wounded without medical aid. Dressings and medicines exhausted. 44<sup>e</sup> , 76<sup>e</sup> , 100<sup>e</sup> , 305<sup>e</sup> , 384<sup>e</sup> infantry divisions wiped out. Front broken up by numerous enemy infiltrations. Support points and shelter possibilities only inside the city. Continued defense pointless. Collapse imminent. To save human lives, the army urgently requests authorization to surrender.*

*Signed: Paulus.*

a The next day, the Führer replied:

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1. 1943.

*I forbid any capitulation! The army will hold its positions to the last man and fight to the last cartridge. Through its heroic resistance, it will make an imperishable contribution to building a defensive front and saving the West.*

*Signed: Hitler.*

"That same evening, Paulus decided to make a third visit to the main headquarters, without waiting until the shrinking space at his disposal made it impossible for his aircraft to take off. This third meeting, of which I was the only witness, was kept strictly secret. It was also by far the most dramatic. My Führer," says Paulus, "the first time I came here, I informed you that if I got off the ground in time, I could still save the men and the guns. The second time, I told you that I could still save the men, but not the weapons; you still refused. Today, I've come to tell you that I can no longer save the men. They are at the end of their tether. You can't imagine their suffering in this hell of ice and fire. Everything, absolutely everything has been done to loosen the Russians' grip. Now there's no hope. There are still almost 250,000 of them. It makes no sense to prolong their agony. Allow me to make an honorable surrender... "

"The Führer stared at him for a long time. Then he roared: "I forbid any surrender! Do you hear me? I forbid it! Any soldier who

surrenders to the enemy is a traitor. Hold on to your positions. Fight to your last breath. And then die where you stand!

My Führer," he cried, "this slaughter is pointless. You're condemning 250,000 men to death for doing their duty. For a soldier like me, this is an act that nothing justifies. I don't understand you!

"Hitler turned livid. He started pacing up and down his office. He shouted: "You don't understand me! You don't understand me! But nobody can understand me, because nobody can stand in my shoes! Every general sees only the small sector of the front under his command. I alone see the whole of operations on land, at sea and in the air; I see them from the North Cape to Africa and from Flanders to the Caucasus... - There's only one thing I understand," replied Paulus. You are condemning to death over 200,000 soldiers for whom there is nothing to reproach... If you don't feel sorry for them, at least feel sorry for their families, their children... - It's precisely because I'm thinking of their children that I'm ordering them to die on the spot," growled Hitler.

"At that moment," continues General Schmudt, "I saw an expression of dismay pass over the eyes of the VI<sup>e</sup> army commander. But Hitler didn't give him time to say a word. I've never given an order I wasn't prepared to carry out myself," he added in one breath. When I was a simple dispatch rider during the 14-18 war, I volunteered for the most perilous missions, and since then, believe me, I've never spared myself! You don't know what kind of bronze I'm made of! I'll never give in. I'll never fall alive into the hands of my enemies. I'll be dead before then. What I ask of the officers and soldiers of the VI<sup>e</sup> army is nothing more than what I am ready to do myself, if circumstances demand it. - But what's the point of destroying one of your best armies with your own hands? - You don't understand... You can't understand... and in a suddenly deeper voice: Listen to me, Paulus. War is a cruel thing. People die every day, at the corner of a wood, at the bend in the road, at the bottom of a ravine. I pity those who die. We can never pity them enough, because they are forgotten victims, anonymous dead. Three months after their disappearance, nobody remembers them apart from their families. But to die at Stalingrad is to cover oneself in undying glory. It will be talked about for centuries to come! And why? Because Stalingrad is the furthest point eastward reached by Germanic blood. It is a historical landmark, a sacred promontory. The

children of all those who died in the war have the right to be proud of their fathers. But those whose fathers died at Stalingrad have a right to be doubly proud! Firstly, because their suffering will have been greater; secondly, because they will have died at the junction of Europe and Asia; and thirdly, because their sacrifice will show what unsurpassable heights the endurance and bravery of our race can reach. Whatever happens, Stalingrad must be a German victory \* And should the God of war force us to evacuate against all odds, the two hundred thousand dead of Stalingrad will stand like a beacon on the steppe. Their children will have only one ambition: to join them. And if it's not their children, other generations will be born who will experience the same attraction. I'll go even further: supposing we're beaten and the Reich collapses, another Reich will emerge for whom the word Stalingrad will have the same magical virtue, men who will say to themselves: "Since our forefathers got this far, we can do no less! Our duty is to go back and prove to the world that the soldiers of 1943 were only a vanguard! Do you understand now why I say to you: don't capitulate! Die on the spot!"

"At that moment, Hitler fell silent, as if exhausted. I didn't know if Paulus, who had no other horizon than the implacable demands of the battlefield, was capable of understanding this visionary language. A few minutes earlier, I'd seen that he thought the Führer had gone mad, and here I suddenly had before me a man transformed. You've no idea how powerful a spell the Führer can exert, when he wants to, on those who approach him. No one can resist it. Not even me. Paulus got back on his plane and left for the hell of Stalingrad without a word.

\* Hitler, for his part, was sure he had convinced him. He was all the more justified in believing this because, on January 29, Paulus sent him the following message:

*To the Führer!*

*The VI<sup>e</sup> army salutes its Führer on the anniversary of his accession to power. May our struggle serve as an example to the living and to future generations, teaching them never to capitulate, even in the face of despair, for then Germany will win Heil, my Führer!*

*Paulus, Colonel-General.*



*Stalingrad, January 29, noon.*

"At the same time, he transmitted the following order to the various corps commanders:

*No documents or weapons may fall into enemy hands. All hitches and trucks must be destroyed, as well as all radio equipment, ciphering machines, codes and secret registers.*

"After that, only a few brief messages were heard from isolated transmitters:

*January 31st - 12.30 pm: Enemy forces directly in front of the gate. There is no doubt as to the outcome of the battle.*

*7.40 pm: Many soldiers wandering about, few fighters. Command slips out of the hands of the staffs. Russian tanks burst in. It's all coming to an end.*

*February 1 - 5.45 a.m.: The Russians are in front of the bunker. We blow it up. This station will never broadcast again.*

"Finally, we heard this final message, launched over the airwaves by a solitary voice:

*February 2 - 12 h 35: Cloud ceiling five thousand metres. Visibility twelve kilometers. Clear sky. Small isolated clouds. Temperature: minus 31 degrees. Over Stalingrad, russet mist and cloud. Nothing moves. End of weather service. Hail to the Fatherland!*

General Schmundt takes a few sips of water. Then he continues:

- You should know that the day before, Hitler had elevated Paulus to the rank of Field Marshal. Why did he do this? Because never in our history has a German field marshal surrendered in open field. It was his way of saying: "You know what I expect of you!"

- And then, on February 2, 1943, Moscow radio delivered the terrible news: Paulus had surrendered. Over 107,000 German soldiers had surrendered to the Russians, led by their field

marshal. What had happened? I doubt it, but I wasn't there.

"Once back in Stalingrad, the spell produced by the Führer's words dissipated. Paulus's eyes widened. He couldn't resist the shock of reality. When he saw the soldiers wandering like ghosts in the ruins of the city and told himself that they had to be ordered to die, he couldn't. He told himself that it would be a waste of time. He thought it would be criminal. He wanted to save *in extremis* what was left of his army.

"No one dared tell the Führer. In the end, Zeitzler did. Hitler was stunned. "I can't understand why Paulus agreed to be taken prisoner! He had the choice between death and immortality, and he flinched at the threshold of immortality? It's incomprehensible that he preferred captivity... But the VI<sup>e</sup> army is not dead! No, no, it's not dead! No, no, it's not dead! Zeitzler, immediately gather all the forces necessary to reconstitute it!"

What dismayed Hitler was not so much the loss of a battle as the collapse of a myth: "All the surviving units of the VI<sup>e</sup> army are going to dissolve in the steppe or leave for the Russian jails from which they will never return," he kept repeating. And the man who did this was Field Marshal Paulus, a man in whom I had put all my trust and whom I wanted to make my Chief of General Staff! I would have delivered him at the last second! Just think how prestigious he would have been! His presence by my side would have galvanized spirits! And it was he, by surrendering, who turned Stalingrad into a Russian victory! He didn't understand what I expected of him... He didn't understand..."

"Hitler - who was never troubled by the idea that he might make a mistake - had always been suspicious of traditional military circles, which he accused of half-heartedness and lack of imagination. Since then, his distrust has become sickly. He saw in every general a potential traitor. He even began to doubt the German people..."

General Schmudt pauses, visibly overwhelmed by these events. He remains silent for a long moment. Then he says in a low voice, as if speaking to himself:

- And now, what will happen? No one can know... The Lord works in mysterious ways...

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### LA SIBYLLE DE LA RUE GIRARDON

(February 1944)

General Schmundt's visit was followed by a long period of calm. The way things are going, I don't feel much like coming out of retirement. Apart from weekly dinners at Alfred Cortot's and a few meetings with Alexis Carrel, I see virtually no one, and I'm all the better for it.

But then, one morning in February 1944, my telephone rang. I was surprised to hear Otto Abetz's voice. He had been absent from Paris for several months, but had just returned to Rue de Lille.

- We haven't seen each other for a long time," he says in a friendly voice. Why don't you come to dinner tomorrow at the embassy? I'd be delighted. Oh no, don't worry; it'll be a very simple dinner, with no fuss or protocol. We'll just spend a relaxing moment together. Just Drieu, Céline, Gen Paul and you.

I hesitate for a moment. Yet the desire to see Drieu and Céline - who rarely leaves his "den" on Rue Girardon - wins out in the end.

When I arrive on Rue de Lille, where I haven't set foot in nearly a year, I'm surprised to see how much everything has changed. The vestibule is plunged into darkness. The windows of the former Hôtel de Beauharnais are covered in black curtains, in compliance with passive defense regulations. The chandeliers are extinguished. The grand salon is lit only by a few lamps that dispense a parsimonious light. I once saw this living room gleaming with lights. With its dead chandeliers and obscured windows, it has a mournful look. Abetz, Céline and Gen Paul are talking in hushed tones in a corner of the room. Only Drieu is left.

When he arrives, we sit down to dinner. The dining room is a little better lit. But, contrary to my expectations, the conversation is languid. Everyone is struggling to find something to say. Drieu, flexible and nonchalant, with a broad forehead and sparse hair, wears an English tweed suit and a red vest. He addresses a problem that has long preoccupied him:

- The child of the XX<sup>e</sup> century, he says, is groping his way through the poorly digested ideologies of the XIX<sup>e</sup> century. He is dragging behind him shreds of ideas - socialism, capitalism,

liberalism - in which he remains entangled. What he's looking for is integrity, a new balance of body and soul...

Drieu puts forward strong thoughts in a hesitant voice. I admire him greatly, ever since I read *Interrogations* and *Fond de cantine*. But his dandyism sometimes annoys me. I see it as a mask behind which he hides a fundamental irresolution. He's a "man on horseback" - straddling several eras and doctrines. He seems to me as entangled as the man of the XX<sup>e</sup> century.

- What is it that ails the human condition?" he continues in a bored tone, "not just capitalism, but its entanglement with nationalism. It's not just the abuse of profit that breaks man, it's the misallocation of raw materials and labor between nations.

We're off to a bad start. Clearly, Drieu is not having the best of days. We're a long way from "the drunkenness poured by the sunny cup of trumpets..."

Perhaps hoping to liven up the conversation, Abetz turns to me.

- By the way," he says, "I heard in Germany that you've seen General Schmudt. What effect did he have on you?

It's all out in the open!

- Excellent," I replied. He told me some extraordinary things about the battle of Stalingrad...

- Which ones?" asks Drieu, whose curiosity is immediately aroused.

- He gave me a terrifying description of the battle. The greatest battles of the past pale in comparison. I'm thinking of Pharsalus, the Catalaunum Fields, Waterloo...

I'm dying to tell them what Schmudt told me. But my commitments to him prevent me from doing so.

- Nobody knows exactly what happened there," continues Drieu, "but one thing is certain: for the first time since the start of the war, the German war machine no longer seems invincible. Why did Hitler cling so stubbornly to lost positions? I don't know, and I'm not competent enough to form an opinion. But on another level, I think I'm right. You know those steel wedges that lumberjacks hammer into tree trunks to shatter them? I have a feeling that something similar happened in Stalingrad. The Russians drove a wedge between Hitler's will and the Wehrmacht's possibilities. We witnessed more than a defeat: a breakdown between technology and ideology...

I'm amazed by Drieu's insight. His gift for analysis is astonishing. He instinctively puts his finger on the wound. Yet he doesn't have the same information I do. If only he knew how accurate what he's saying is!

- Until then, technology and ideology had gone hand in hand. There was no gap between Hitler's will and the instrument of that will. Thanks to this, Germany had won an uninterrupted string of victories. Now, however, the axe has split the trunk in two. Since then, Germany's armies have been in constant retreat. And not just in Russia, but in Africa, Sicily, Southern Italy... It seems as if something in the mechanics has broken...

Abetz felt that, as Reich ambassador, he had a duty to refute this pessimistic viewpoint, which in no way accorded with official statements.

- It's only an appearance," he notes. Russia, Africa, even Italy, are merely peripheral territories, external glacis. But Germany is still intact. The heart of the fortress is stronger than ever, if only because it's more compact, its lines of communication less distended...

- I don't like this argument," interjects Drieu. It's the one all those who back down hide behind.

- Yes, when they retreat in disorder," replies Abetz briskly. But that's not our case. We're retreating step by step, clinging to the ground. Look how long it took the Anglo-' Americans took to take Cassino! And every minute saved is put to maximum use.

- What?" I asked.

- To strengthen our war potential. I have just spent several months in Germany. I've seen the whole people close ranks, stretch their energies and show fierce determination everywhere. The factories are running at full capacity. Thanks to Speer, our war production is skyrocketing. We produce four to five times more weapons than at the start of the war. In 1940, we produced around ten thousand aircraft. Today, we're building over forty thousand. The same applies to tanks. I can't remember the figures, but I do know that they have increased tenfold, despite the American bombing raids. And here's the point: this increase is not just quantitative, but qualitative. Our new Super-Tigers far outstrip the Russian T34s and American Shermans. In aviation, our superiority is even greater. We have completely new aircraft, powered by turbojets rather than propellers. They reach the speed

of sound, 1,400 kilometers per hour, while Allied aircraft barely exceed 750. Ghost planes! They fly so fast you can't hear them coming. You don't know they're there until they're gone. And then, on top of all that, we're going to bring out some absolutely unheard-of secret weapons that will bring England and Russia to their knees.

- It's the forge of the Niebelungen! remarks Drieu.

- Those who know all these things are not dreamers," replies Abetz, emphasizing every word, because he thought he detected a hint of irony in Drieu's remark. They are sturdy minds, scientists, engineers who don't talk in the air, but base their reasoning on mathematical evidence. They believe that we have never been so close to winning the war. Our new weapons will not only change the face of the battlefield from top to bottom: they will represent an unprecedented technological revolution, the consequences of which will continue to be felt once peace has been restored...

- When and where will they intervene?" I asked the ambassador.

- I don't know. And even if I did, I couldn't tell you. All I can assure you is that it won't be long now. That's why every minute you save is precious.

During Abetz's explanations, I watched Céline. He didn't utter a word throughout dinner. He just sat there, his head buried in his shoulders, his forehead lowered. There's an unspeakable sadness on his face. Will he remain mute for the rest of the evening? I've seen him like this before, about six months ago, at dinner with Abel Bonnard in a little restaurant on Rue Caulaincourt. Dark, gloomy, withdrawn, but under pressure like a boiler about to burst. Suddenly, he had emerged from his silence. First in a muffled voice, then louder and louder as his fever grew and he revelled in the tumultuous monologue coming out of his mouth. He had described a film script he was planning to write. A film about Scylla. It was extraordinary. We were hanging on his every word, fascinated, transfixed. I still remember what he called the "poppy scene". Scylla, in a white toga, advancing through a field of bright red poppies, a small wand in hand, amusing himself by slicing off with a sharp stroke any poppy that stuck out its head above the others. As he went along, his rage grew as more and more poppies grew back. There were always more than the others. The field of scarlet flowers stretched as far as the eye could see, and Scylla was seized with a kind of frenzy. Each cut

poppy fell to the ground and became a human head. The field of flowers turned into a sea of blood. The blood level rose and rose. At first, it didn't go beyond his ankles. Gradually it reached his knees, his hips, then his chest. Then Scylla would panic and call for help. He was calling for someone to come and save him before he drowned. Human heads piled up on the ground. But the bloody poppies kept growing back. They would have had to be cut off all at once, for absolute equality is only possible in death. Let's do it any way we want", had concluded

Céline, it's always the same story: no elites without power, but no power without the massacre of elites. Life is an adventure from which you don't come out alive. -

*I know how dull and clumsy my evocation is compared to his. But who could compete with him? What came out of his mouth was a torrential flow of words and images, each more hallucinatory than the last. We listened, speechless, at a loss for words. He had transmitted his nightmare to us like a contagious disease.*

I look at him intently, seated before me at the table in the German embassy. His face is pale, pained, almost inexpressive. But his nostrils are quivering and I can feel an eruptive force building up in him, comparable to the one that preceded his description of the "poppy scene". I wonder if he'll explode in the same way...

And suddenly it explodes:

- Enough!" he said, "enough!" slapping the table with both hands to the point of rattling the glasses. I've had enough of listening to your bullshit! You're not there at all... You think you're being clever, wrapping your brains around a well-served table while the world falls apart... My word, you've got a pearly dust over your eyes, lead in your ears. And you, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, hide behind figures gathered from the dustbins of spoiled technocrats! But these figures prove nothing! What counts is not what you produce, but what your enemies produce! If you build forty thousand planes, the Americans will build two hundred thousand. If you build a hundred thousand tanks, they'll build a million. They'll counter your secret weapons with even more secret and deadly ones. You can't help it: they are the mass, and the function of the mass is to crush everything. In the meantime, you're slyly hiding the essential from us. Why don't



you tell us that Hitler is dead?

- Hitler's dead? exclaims Abetz, widening his eyes.

- You know it as well as we do! You just don't want to say it. But you don't need to be an ambassador to know it: it's obvious! The Jews have replaced him with one of their own!

Abetz, Drieu and I were breathless. We knew of Céline's audacity. But we never thought he could push it so far. Now that he's started, where will he stop? And to think that the ambassador had invited us to spend a relaxing moment with him!

- I'm telling you, he's not the same man," continues Céline. We put someone else in his place. Just look at him! Every move he makes, every decision he takes, is designed to ensure the triumph of the Jews. So, let's be logical! The Jews have pulled off the greatest hoax in history! They made Hitler disappear into a trapdoor and replaced him with their own guy. Notice that he shows up less and less in public. That's so people won't notice the difference. Which is silly, by the way. No one is easier to imitate. My friend Gen Paul, here, imitates him perfectly. Don't you think so, Gégène? He's funny when he does that! All he needs is a pinch of scaferlati, which he sticks under his nostrils to replace the moustache. Come on, my good Gégène, don't be shy! We're all friends here. Show us how well you can do your little Hitler...

Gégène hesitates a little. But he finally complies. He takes a tobacco pouch from his pocket, pulls out a pinch of scaferlati, kneads it between three fingers and places it under his nose. Then, with an abrupt gesture, he pulls back a lock of hair across his forehead, assumes a Napoleonic pose (one hand behind his back, the other in the crook of his vest), rolls furious eyes and says in a guttural voice:

- Raou, raou, raou, raous!

He looks surprisingly like Hitler. Also Chariot, Groucho Marx and Felix the Cat. Abetz doesn't know what to do. But like all of us, he's seized by an irresistible urge to laugh.

- You see!" says Céline with a tragic air, "it's no more difficult than that I Now it's a Jew who says "Raous" in his place. Everything is ready for their triumph. And I assure you they won't have a graceful triumph. We won't be dealing with the melancholy little Jews of the Rue des Rosiers, with their duck-like gait and languid eyes. Not even the Rothschilds, those princes of the Diaspora! Not even to the Rothschilds, those Diaspora princes! To the fat, plump Jews of New York and Chicago, the formidable meat-packers, the

Wall Street bankers who chant their stock market orders in rabbinic tones before the Wailing Wall, the Morgenthau's, the Baruch's, the Wertheimer's, those Nobel Prize winners of discomfiture, those great strategists of demoralization! They'll re-educate the world in no time, you'll see! Hitler is doing everything to prepare for their advent, to blow up the last bastion separating them from universal domination. Wonderful collaborator! He rounds them up everywhere, and sends them to his camps. To do what with them? I ask you? Fertilizer, I'm told. Only a Jew could have had such an idea! Who do you want it to benefit, if not them? When they've won the war, they'll put this fertilizer in little bags and sell it in public squares all over the world. A great intercontinental lottery. "Buy my little bags! Buy my little bags! You refuse? Then fine. You'll be shot! - But what do you want me to pay you with? - With tears. We've been crying for seven thousand years! We'll take turns! When the bags run out, we'll make new ones. We'll keep making them until they're used up for centuries! Why stop the greatest business of all time in its tracks? I'm telling you: *Fertig!* It's all over. The Reich *Kaputt!* The false Hitler is going to bring everything crashing down in an Apocalyptic wobble...

Abetz is on pins and needles.

He has a justified admiration for the author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. He also knows Paris. He knows that words fly more lightly there than elsewhere. But the waiters in their white jackets who circle the table with impassive faces know enough French to understand what Céline is saying. *Hitler Kaputt* needs no translation. And even if they didn't understand, Gen Paul's gesticulation was eloquent enough. Now, some of these waiters must be police officers. No doubt they'll report back to their chiefs. They will describe the incredible scene they have just witnessed. They will say that the Reich ambassador witnessed Céline's vaticinations, Gen Paul's mimodrama, without raising a protest. We're all in danger of spending the night at the station...

So, to pre-empt a denunciation by having Céline arrested on the spot? Abetz is reluctant. He's well aware that Drieu and I will ask to suffer the same fate. And then, deep down, I suspect he's fascinated by what the author of *Mort à crédit* has just said. Perhaps one solution would be to ask the waiters to withdraw and leave us alone? No. That would only confirm their belief that what began as a casual conversation has ended in a conspiracy.

- Céline, you're losing your head," said the ambassador at last. Think about where you are and measure your words!

- Measure my words! Measure my words!" cries Céline, exasperated by this intervention. Is that all you have to say to me? But do you measure what's about to fall on your head? A string of Vesuvius, a farandole of volcanoes! Germany will disappear in a hurricane of sulfur and fire! The earth will rise up and engulf its cities, or at least what's left of them. Everything will be shelled, charred, vaporized, annihilated! The Russians will march in triumph under the Brandenburg Gate. And Hitler, having completed his task, will have vanished without a trace. Pfft! Gone! Gone who knows where! Not a button on his tunic, not a hair on his moustache! You'll see - if you're still alive.

- Céline, please!" moans the ambassador, who doesn't know what else to do.

- You think I'm exaggerating, because I see what lies ahead more clearly than you do? It's not my fault I'm not an ambassador! You can't see the future because you don't even understand the past. My word, I live in a world of the blind! Nobody can see that there was no Franco-German war...

Now it's my turn to be suffocated. In August 1939, I heard General Gamelin tell me that if we declared war on Germany, he would never have to deal with the German army. And now Céline is declaring that there was no war? I seem to remember...

But Céline is unleashed. A straitjacket wouldn't shut him up. Clinging with both hands to the embassy table like a pythia to its tripod, head tilted back, eyes dilated, I almost expect to see steam coming out of his nostrils. With his cleft palate and great useless frame, with his haggard face that expresses all the pain of the world from bending over the tubards and scrofulous patients of Clichy, I see what he is, Dr Destouches: a vaticinator in the grip of his demons, a subhuman of superhuman dimensions, an extralucid giant ravaged by that incurable cancer that is a great frustrated love.

- No, there was no Franco-German war! That's obvious! In 39, there may have been something between the Germans and the Polacks, or even - I don't mind - between the Germans and the Rouskis. There was nothing between the Germans and the French. The French didn't give a damn about Danzig or the Corridor. They didn't want to fight over muddy issues. It was impossible to

make them see the light at the end of the tunnel. Nor could the St. George cavalry be mistaken for the Polish cavalry! And they've proved it. The verdigris came in like butter.

Come on, I've heard those words before...

- We weren't crazy! We were at home, cushy, between the T.S.F. and the aperitif. We had Alsace-Lorraine, paid vacations and a permanent pot-au-feu. What more could we want, the moon? We weren't going to get killed for people we didn't know! So we wisely walked away...

- You're exaggerating," I exclaim.

- Shut up, young man! You're not going to give lessons in patriotism to cuirassier Bardamu! We fought in the war of 1914! Believe me! That was a different matter. Back then, the Krauts didn't enter Paris. I couldn't believe it. My wife was getting on my nerves. She wanted to leave. "You'll see, they're coming," she'd say. And I replied: "Leave me alone. Don't piss me off! Whatever happens, we'll stay right here! And then, one fine morning, we learned that the Fritzes were heading down rue Lepic through the Porte de Clignancourt...

- Rue Lepic!

- Yes, that's where Lucette and I were living at the time... You can imagine! Pigalle, *Paris by night*, they couldn't resist it. They wanted to consult the original manuscript of *Journey to the End of the Night*, to see if it was true, when all they had to do was look around to see that they were living it! So I said to Lucette: "Get your things ready. We're leaving I - I thought we were staying here? - Don't ask questions. I'm telling you we're leaving." We loaded everything onto the roof of the car and set off. The roads were no longer roads: they were rivers of scrap metal through which we had to propel ourselves with jackhammers. After fifty-two hours, we arrived in Montfort-l'Amaury. Remember, Gégène?

Gen Paul widens his eyes. He doesn't seem to understand.

- There, in the main square, what do I see? A company of Republican Guards, with weapons and ammunition. They were lined up in columns of four, bayonets at their sides, rifles slung over their shoulders, harnesses well polished. A superb troop. My blood runs cold. I think back to Charleroi. I get out of the car and walk up to their lieutenant. I introduce myself to him: "Cavalier Destouches! - So what," he replies, "what's it to me? - I wanted to

tell you, my lieutenant, that it's a real pleasure to see a troop like yours. Now the bastard's gloating! "Yes, it's a real pleasure to see a compact, well-aligned troop in the middle of the general mess. Are you going to the front? - No," he replies, scratching his temple. - So, where are you going? - We're not going anywhere. - Why's that? - Because we can't. - You can't? What do you mean, you can't? - We're prisoners. - Prisoners? But that's impossible! I've just come from Paris. I haven't seen a single German the whole way. They must still be twenty kilometers away! - We're prisoners by phone," he replied peremptorily, cutting short the discussion h

You see," Céline continues in a booming voice, "you see that there was no Franco-German war! If there had been, do you think twenty million Frenchmen would have poured south and the Republican Guards, those elite soldiers, would have let themselves be taken prisoner by telephone? They would have dug trenches and been chopped up on the spot. There was *no Franco-German* war. We weren't involved. There was a *Judeo-Hitler* war. That's another thing altogether. But they were careful not to tell us, because they didn't want anyone to know. France was drawn into the war as if it were a trap. The country felt it confusedly. That's why it withdrew. It

1. When the Germans approached Paris, the Garde Mobile and Republican units left the capital. Then, when Paris was declared an open city, it was agreed that these troops would return to their barracks to maintain order. The detachment in Montfort-l'Amaury must have received a telephoned order to return to Paris. Hence this expression from its lieutenant: ■ We are prisoners by telephone. ■ beaten as little as possible. Don't tell me it's because we didn't have enough tanks or planes. That's a line of reasoning for old women and retired colonels. Not for mezigue. We had more than enough weapons to fight better than that, if we'd wanted to. The truth is, the heart wasn't in it, and the heart wasn't in it because it wasn't our war. Who was it who led our war? I mean the real one, the tough one, the one who believed in it? It wasn't Daladier, or Gamelin, or even Reynaud, that Mexican marmoset led by Churchill. It was Mandel. Real name Rothschild! He never flinched. When he could no longer lead the fight in France, he left for Africa to round up the troops. Schleuhs, Bounoules, Caffres, whatever. He didn't care if France was turned into a scorched earth. It wasn't his field, after all! The

Franco-German war had failed. The Judeo-Hitler war had to go on. For the Jews, it was a catastrophe, perhaps a definitive halt to their quiet climb to world domination. We, on the other hand, let ourselves be fooled. We were no match for them! What could we do, poor thatch-haired landlubbers who believed in the land, in friendship, in honor, against these gigantic speculators who don't care about anything and who trade pieces of the continent for their weight in nickel or guano? We were doomed! Especially as we have a suicidal taste for "generous ideas". I mean, the ones that most certainly kill us. Still, we'd achieved something. Civilization was beginning to take shape, it was looking good, it could go higher, oh seasons, oh castles! Then, all of a sudden, someone shouted: "Stop! You've got to be kidding me! Numbers must rule!" Everyone shouted bravo! But we weren't numbers. We were just a poor little minority on a poor little piece of the planet. And then someone waxed: "Stop! it's not numbers, it's blood that makes the law!" This was even more dangerous, because it's true! You don't have to dissect chromosomes to know that. But white blood is not dominant. You can't imagine how fragile and delicate it is. It fades like a young girl at the first crossover. The dominant blood types are Semitic, black and yellow.

"That's why the Jews aren't done yet. They crushed Hitler. So be it. That's settled. Let's leave it at that. But there's still Stalin, who doesn't have them in his heart and will give them a hard time. And behind Stalin there's China. The only country in the world with *both* numbers and dominant blood. In the end, it will swoop down on us and swallow us all up, like a handful of bleach-bleached larvae!

For some time now, Abetz has been struggling to contain himself. I think he's going to make a scene too. But Céline continues. Sweat beads on his forehead. He stiffens. His breath becomes shorter. He groans:

- Parisians are going to have a field day when they see the Chink vanguards marching into Galeries Lafayette and looting the frivolity department! I leave you to wonder what will be left of the world, of that famous civilization you're always crowing about, without doing anything to defend it! Nothing but smoking ruins bathed in a cloud of phosphorus, swarms of Mongolian children and a yellow sun setting on a world even yellower than itself...

He stands up and dances around the table, repeating:

- Mongolian children... Mongolian children...

Abetz, so tense earlier, has suddenly relaxed. He smiles. Céline's dance step saved the day. The waiters must have realized he'd lost his mind. You can't stop a madman! He beckons one of them over to the table and says a few words in his ear.

Céline sits back down, rests her elbows on the tablecloth, clutches her head in her hands and remains silent. He's as gray as ash. His half-closed eyelids hide his eyes. His flesh looks like it's been worked deep down by all sorts of viruses: tuberculosis, leukemia, syphilis. One wonders how he's still hanging on. There would be something pitiful about him if his bone structure weren't so robust. And yet, one senses incredible reserves of energy. He reminds us of those incurable patients who resist all treponemes and whom doctors call hospital pillars. Yes, Céline is a pillar. A pillar of the immense hospital that Europe has become... And always, on her face, a tragic expression. That of the white man in disarray, shattered, ruined.

Abetz's driver entered the room.

- You're going to drive Mr. Céline home, 4, rue Girardon," said the ambassador. But drive very slowly, because he's not well. You'll come back tomorrow to bring him some fruit and check on him... And you," he said, turning to Drieu, "will you wait until the car returns?"

- Oh me," replies Drieu, "I live on Avenue de Breteuil. I'd rather walk home. It'll do me good to get some fresh air.

- Do you have an *Ausweiss*?

- No.

- Hang on a sec. I'll have one drawn up for you, in case you come across a patrol.

- Gen Paul and I are going to take Céline home," I tell the ambassador. She's the sibyl of our neighborhood. All three of us live in Montmartre...

In the car that takes us back, Céline doesn't say a word.

- All the same, what did you break for them?" said Gen Paul in a low voice.

Céline opens one eye and replies in a calm tone:

- If I'd told them everything that's on my mind, it would have been worse...

## CHAPTER XIX

### LAST VISION OF BEAUCE

(June 5, 1944)

Food has never been an essential preoccupation for me. I've always been fine. But for some time now, I've been feeling a slight gnawing in my stomach accompanied by dizziness, which is the characteristic sign of undernourishment. Since 1940, no black-market products have entered the house. I formally opposed this, believing it impossible to violate the regulations laid down by the government to which I belonged. So, reduced to our official rations, our meals were always extremely frugal.

But now it's too much. My mother, who already eats very little, now eats almost nothing. Both she and Euphrasie are losing weight. What's more, R.A.F. incursions are multiplying. It will soon be impossible to travel on the roads, and Paris will be virtually cut off from the countryside. After devoting myself to so many useless tasks, it's high time I started worrying about supplying my people. So I've decided to take my little Simca 5 and my driver Bernard out to the provinces to get some food before it's too late.

But where could I go without damaging my modest fuel supply? I hardly know anyone in the occupied zone, and black-market channels are an enigma to me. Instinctively, I think of the Beauce region and the flocks of sheep I saw grazing there in the distant days of *La Moisson de Quarante*. Among the many friends I've kept in Voves, there must be one who can point me to a farm where I'll find what I'm looking for?



We set off on the morning of June 5. Already, Chartres cathedral looms on the horizon, with its soaring steeples that I've never been able to see without emotion. But today it's not a cathedral I'm looking for, be it a "prayer loft". The object of my journey is much more down-to-earth. It's about escaping the dark terror that precedes hunger, as if to remind man how close he still is to the beast.

Once past the Eure-et-Loir prefecture, the plain stretches out as far as the eye can see, a plain that has always seemed to me akin to the ocean, with its boundless horizons, its disdain for shadows and the rippling wheat that ripples across its surface. I notice that the harvest is going to be far less beautiful than in 1940. The stalks are tall and spindly, the ears puny and strewn with rusty spots that don't bode well. What's more, from far and wide I can see long black streaks that scar the fields, as if they'd been set on fire: they're due to the trails of flames left behind by downed planes. War, always war!... When I first came here, the battle was fading away. It had passed over the country with such rapidity that it had not even bent the heads of the ears of corn, and above the countryside, which felt reborn, was a pure sky where the larks were singing.

Four years have passed since then, and once again the fist of war is pressing down on us. Air raids and bombings multiply. The sky is filled with the sound of engines, punctuated now and then by a dull explosion. The fear of imminent devastation fills the villages with an anguished daze.

Not all of them, however, as the imminence of death seems to give an added intensity to certain manifestations of life. As I approached a large village between Dammarie and Berchères-les-Pierres, I was struck by how busy it was. The road is jammed with trucks, pedestrians and horses. Is it market day? Bernard asks a fat man in a blue smock, holding a whip. No. It's something else entirely. The German military authorities are carrying out a final requisition of horses. All those who still own horses in the region have been ordered to bring them to the market square to present them to the remount commission.

- Let's go," I say to Bernard, "I'm curious to see how it goes. We're ahead of schedule anyway, and it'll only take a moment.

We turn right. When we arrive at the foirail, I let out a whistle of

surprise: a multitude of horses are gathered on a dusty esplanade, surrounded by houses. I've never seen so many at once. How many can there be? Twelve to fifteen hundred at least. Nothing but stallions. Boulonnais, Ardennais, Percherons with broad chests and rounded rumps. Some have almost white coats, others are bay or chestnut. Long tufts of hair cover their hooves, and their blond manes are lighter than the rest of their bodies. These are whole beasts, formidably armed for war and breeding. No other breed was known in the West before the introduction of Arabian thoroughbreds. Their ancestors carried the heaviest men on earth on their backs: Roman emperors, Renaissance condottieri, Louis XIV's marshals. Once beasts of war and parade, today they are used only for draught and ploughing.

They are massed on the esplanade in groups of five or six, often so close together that their rumps are touching. The weather is stormy. At times, a ray of sunlight breaks through the layer of clouds. Then a buzzing noise rises from the square: swarms of flies and horseflies drawn from every corner of the horizon by the penetrating smell of dung and urine.

A few horses scrape the dust off the esplanade with their hooves. They're starting to get nervous. Every now and then, one of them lets out a short whinny.

- Arrê! Clovis, arrê!" shouts a stablehand, patting him on the back to induce calm. Then, turning to one of his colleagues, he says: "You've no idea! They've summoned us for 7 o'clock. It's nearly 11 and there's still no one here. These gentlemen are good, but they don't know horses!

If what I think is happening happens, we won't be able to hold them. Then it'll be ugly.

I don't know what he's thinking, but I'm about to find out, because a grey stallion lets out a prolonged neigh, very different from those heard so far. A chestnut responds at the other end of the barn. This cry has a particular accent that I immediately perceive. There's something vibrant and impetuous about it. Is it a war cry, a challenge, a love call? The horses prick up their ears. Deep in their blood, something has awakened. They scratch at the ground, raising a cloud of dust to their knees. Suddenly, one of them rears up and lets out a long, savage scream. A club of flesh as big as an arm springs from between her thighs. It jerks up and

beats against his belly. Standing almost vertically on his hind legs, he gasps. His nostrils quiver. And suddenly, with a whinny that seems to emanate from the very depths of the species, he swoops down on the stallion in front of him with the intention of bending him over. The beast's anger spreads from near to near. Ten, twenty, a hundred horses reared up in turn. Soon, all the stallions are trying to mount each other. It's a furious melee. Their eyes become bloodshot and their mouths fill with foam. Twelve to fifteen hundred rutting stallions trying to ride each other in the middle of a French village is a spectacle difficult to describe. No fountain in Rome, no Baroque bas-relief, could give an idea. There's something Homeric about all those undulating rumps, all those hooves beating the air, all those intertwining neighs. It's like a centaur fight. Which god has suddenly descended on this square, unleashing this furious melee in his wake? Is it Eros or Dionysus? What gives free rein before my eyes is pure instinct, in all its animal splendor. I've never seen it expressed so strikingly. By now, the cloud of dust has passed over the animals' spines. Only the manes and heads with their dilated nostrils can still be seen, towering above the cloud of steam. They look like Neptune's horses rising from the sea, Apollo's horses rising from the clouds. Ah, I see what this is: I'm witnessing one of those privileged moments when myth suddenly bursts into life, to make reality something more than reality...

The grooms and stablehands have cautiously stepped aside to avoid being trampled. Leaning against the walls of the houses, they no longer even try to calm their stallions. They know it's useless, that nothing can prevail over the frenzy that possesses them, that the only thing to do is wait for the storm to pass. But they're trembling all over. Is it fear or excitement? I catch a glimpse of a stray gleam in their eyes, as if something of the horses' ardor has passed into them. A mysterious, all-powerful connivance of instinct, spreading like wildfire and making men vibrate in unison with their beasts!

Bernard, who has lost none of his practicality, consults his watch.

- It's nearly noon," he says. If we want to be in Voves for lunch...

That's right! I'd completely forgotten the purpose of our trip. Our hunt for food suddenly seems ridiculous. I'd like to know how this eruption of vitality will end, this sudden insurrection of the flesh that no one can predict how it will end, since no one can say how it began. But Bernard is right. We'd better get out of here. We get back

in the car. The scene I've just described didn't last an hour. But I'm sure it will stay with me for a long time, and that I'll see the image of all those rutting stallions, pitted against each other in the heart of the Beauce.

We spend a good part of the afternoon visiting the farms my Decourtye friends have indicated. But the farmers are reluctant. Perhaps they think we're supply inspectors? After much palaver, they finally give us three chickens, two rabbits and a lump of butter. Bernard and I share the spoils.

That's probably not bad for a first trip. But it didn't satisfy my fixed idea: to buy a couple of sheep. After much difficulty, we finally found a breeder who agreed to sell us two, for an exorbitant price.

I expected them to be at least two beautiful beasts. But alas! They're scrawny, leggy little lambs, not much more than six weeks old. I have to say that, for the price, it's really too much.

- It's true that they're not fat," replies the breeder, "but take it or leave it. I don't want to sell them. Besides, you'll have to take them away alive and kill them yourself. I don't want to be charged with illegal slaughter.

Clearly, he doesn't trust us.

I look at the two lambs. Their wool is white and curly like an image of Saint-Sulpice. No doubt, if I tie their legs together, it will be possible to carry them in the back seat of the car. If we hide them under a blanket - and as long as they don't bleat - no one will see them. But I don't see myself killing and skinning them with my own hands in the cellar of my building. What can I do?

- It's true that they're quite young," says the breeder, shaking his head. It would be better to wait a little, so they can put on some weight.

Then a bright idea popped into my head.

- Why don't I leave them with you for a while and put them to good use?

- It would certainly be better...

- How much would it take to make it worthwhile?

- Eight to ten weeks.

- We'll work it out. We'll work something out. I'll buy them from you at the agreed price and pay you right away. But you keep them for me to fertilize. I'll come back for them in two or

three months. These are two ewes?

- One male and one female.

- It's perfect.

The deal was struck immediately.

As we leave the farm, I add:

- If for any reason I have to delay my arrival, keep them carefully. And if they become small between now and my return, set them aside for me. They're included in the price.

- All right.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I've made a good deal.

We get back in the car and drive home. Daylight is falling. Our road runs straight ahead, like a ribbon of asphalt between two stretches of wheat. The ears of wheat look increasingly russet to me. Suddenly, immediately after a crossroads, I see two, then three piles of twisted scrap metal in the middle of a field. They are the charred carcasses of three flying fortresses, recently shot down by the German D.C.A.. What a sinister sight! They look like whale skeletons washed ashore. It makes me feel even more strongly that the Beauce is an ocean.

Just as we're leaving Chartres, the city's sirens start blaring. It's an alert. As it's almost dark, Bernard stops the car at the side of the road and turns off his headlights. This is the safest thing to do, as the fighter planes escorting the bombers sometimes unleash machine-gun fire on anything they see moving.

Then a roar passes over our heads, at once very powerful and very gentle. It's so dense and continuous that it fills the whole space like the roar of a cataract. It must come from several hundred bombers flying at very high altitude. It swells slowly, peaks and then subsides. When it is no more than an imperceptible murmur, Bernard turns on the ignition and we're off to Paris. The wave of bombers has passed. But just before reaching the capital, the German D.C.A. suddenly wakes up. A barrage of fire erupted from the batteries on Mont Valérien. Explosions follow each other in quick succession with a dry yap, and it's amid a firework display of illuminating shells and tracer bullets that we return home.

When I told my farmer in Voves that I'd be back to pick up my cattle in two or three months' time, I had no idea that at dawn the next day, Anglo-American forces would land in Normandy, and that the roads leading to the Chartres region would become impassable as

they were raked by machine-gun fire from R.A.F. squadrons. Nor did I know what was in store for me in the weeks ahead.

Since then, images of the Beauce region have come back to me again and again, less like things remembered than like the ebb and flow of the sea. I thought of those sun-drenched wheat fields, where my exhausted comrades had regained their strength. I thought back to that other strange, slightly sinister day, when the whinnying of horses was overlaid by the roar of engines so powerful that I thought I heard a legion of exterminating angels pass overhead.

Thirty years later, as I write these lines, I'm reminded of that land, both near and far, which played such a big part in my life and which I'll probably never see again. But I like to think - if my salesman kept his word - that I must now own a number of sheep infinitely greater than all Abraham's flocks...

Unless they too have gone up in smoke.

## CHAPTER XX

### "PUT YOURSELF IN MY SHOES!"

(September 1944)

- Pack your things! You'll be shot tonight.
  - Well, well, well! I thought that was done in the morning?
- The police inspector looks at me annoyed.

- This isn't what you think. You're going down to the Depot.

I've been held for ten days in an office at the Préfecture de Police. The room is empty. Four burly men armed with revolvers take turns at the door. They watch me walk in circles like a curious beast. It's a long day under the gaze of four men who talk amongst themselves, but never say a word to you! Yet the night is harder than the day. You hope it will bring you rest and oblivion. It's an illusion. Lying on the cement isn't just cold: it hurts your back. And when I lie on my side, it bruises my hip. Fortunately, I've found a trick that makes things a little easier: my handkerchief, pressed into a pad that I insert between my bone and the floor. But why talk about all this? It'll all be over soon, because this very evening, I'm going to descend into hell.

At 7 p.m., two guards come to take delivery of my person, to take me to the Dépôt. The heavy doors of the Conciergerie closed on me. I find myself in the "mousetrap". A control desk. Always escorted by my guards, I follow a maze of increasingly dark corridors with lowering vaults. I feel like I'm going underground.

Suddenly, I find myself in a vast hall that is part cathedral, part cesspool. Stubby pillars support a delicately ribbed Gothic vault. A host of shadows stir. As I move too slowly for my guards'

liking, they push me towards an enormous iron cage that occupies the entire back of the room. A third guard opens a small door in the bars and locks it behind me. Here I am in the so-called "bear pit".

This place deserves its name. A suffocating stench grips my nostrils. It smells of urine, fermented cabbage, ammonia and tar. Water oozes from the stones. The floor is covered with soiled papers and excrement. Fifteen meters up, a light bulb covered in dust and cobwebs is fixed to the wall. It's enclosed in a small metal cage, because here, even light is a prison.

In the half-darkness, I can make out silhouettes walking in circles, talking in low voices. Their groups come and go for no apparent reason, like laboratory insects whose antennae have been cut off. I recognize Colonel Fonck, one of the heroes of the 14-18 war, Jean de Castellane, the former president of the city council, and "Parisian" personalities from the worlds of theater, cinema, finance and the press. What we used to call "le gratin". Now they've been thrown out. But they're not the only ones. There are also civil servants, workers, shopkeepers, strangers, people of all ages and conditions. Not to mention myself...

Yet I have no regrets about being here. If I hadn't come here, I would never have known that this canker existed in the heart of the City of Light, a sinister and degrading place where men, pitted against each other like wild beasts in the night, treat each other worse than they would animals. How many times, strolling along the quays, have I admired the beautiful round towers of the Palais de Justice, without suspecting for a moment what they contained in their depths. I don't know what the future holds for me, but I'm certain of one thing: never again will I be able to walk past them without thinking about them.

Shadows come towards me and hold out their hands. We exchange a few words. Suddenly, my name rings out from the vault, shouted by a loud voice. A guard extracts me from the "bear pit" and leads me to the clerk's office. I thought it was an office staffed by white-collar secretaries in shiny sleeves. No. It's a simulacrum of a theatrical dressing room. Two men in scruffy outfits behind a counter take your tie, belt, wristwatch and shoelaces. Then, with touching solicitude, they feel you up and down to see if there's a penknife or nail file in your pockets that you could injure yourself with. I've lost quite a bit of weight in



the last ten days, and have to make an effort to keep my pants up, which are in danger of falling to my knees at any moment. All these little treasures are placed in a numbered locker and I am made to sign an inventory at the bottom of a register. Then a guard holding a bunch of keys instructs me to follow him.

Again, a long corridor, on both sides of which are a succession of metal doors, all alike. They're painted gray, with big locks, and look like safe doors. My guard opens one of them. I can make out an obscure passageway that seems full of people. There's an immediate chorus of protest, for it's as crowded as a subway car at rush hour.

- Political bastards!" grumbles the guard through his teeth. There are so many of them, we don't know where to put them!

He closes the door, takes a few steps and opens the next one. The cell is a little less full. The guard pushes a body lying across the threshold with his foot. I hear a groan. At the same moment, the guard knees me in the kidneys to push me forward and closes the door behind me. *Crack, crack*. I'm locked in. I hear his footsteps moving away.

Suddenly, I'm overcome by a great weariness. With a mechanical gesture, I consult my watch. I'd forgotten that I'd left it at the clerk's office. What time could it be? Impossible to know. Maybe there's no time here anymore? Where am I? Following dark corridors, I don't know either. I feel as if I've slipped into a black hole from which I'll never emerge. The vault is so low I can barely stand. My foot touches the inert body of the sleeper lying on the floor, which the guard has pushed aside to make room for me. I now know the horror miners must feel at the bottom of their shafts, when a blast of firedamp has toppled tons of scree over their heads, blocking their way back up to daylight...

But this is no time to let yourself go. A small light bulb, covered in dust and fly droppings, is fixed above the door in its metal cage. It doesn't light up much more than a nightlight, and goes out from time to time, as its wire must be worn. In its intermittent glow, I can vaguely make out a score of bodies lying on the floor, wrapped in blankets, mops and old cement sacks. They form a gray, shapeless mass, from which rise snores, whistles and, at times, an inarticulate grunt. It's really awful when a man is asleep and can't hide anything behind gestures or words...

Let's see, what time can it be? About 10 o'clock, if I'm not mistaken. It must be the middle of the night. This is no time for big decisions. Let's wait until tomorrow, when it's light. Until then, let's sleep. Or rather, let's try to sleep.

I lie down in the sixty-centimeter-wide gutter between the wall and the nearest sleeper. His body is right up against mine. I feel his warmth, which is pleasant because I don't have a blanket; but also the sour smell of his breath, which is much less so. His sleep is aghast. He tosses and turns, nudging me, and finally wakes up. He's obviously nervous. Something's bothering him that he'd like to confide in someone. Someone who might sympathize with him. He repeatedly pushes a finger into my ribs to see if I'm awake. I pretend not to feel anything. I want to sleep so badly! But when two men are lying side by side and one of them wants to talk, it's always the one who wins. Finally, I open my eyes. I don't know how he did it, because it's dark as a tomb, but he noticed right away. He must be sensitive. A youngster perhaps, afraid and looking for reassurance. I try to see his face. I can't. It's too dark. It's too dark. All I can see is a tuft of hair, of an indefinable color, emerging from an old blanket.

- It's ugly here," he says in a low voice.

- Yes.

Silence.

- Can you hear me?

- Yes.

As I don't want to encourage him to speak, I stick to monosyllables. And so, in this sepulchral setting, the following monologue begins:

- Hein, monsieur! Couldn't we have known it would end like this?... If I'd known, I wouldn't have pushed so hard.

- She lived in a bungalow in Montreuil. She had beautiful jewelry. She didn't want to give them away. Put yourself in my shoes! I had to kill her...

- Ah?

- But, you know, a corpse is big! When I saw the woman lying on the kitchen floor... Put yourself in my shoes! I had to cut her into pieces...

- Ah!

- But you know, sir, that's a lot of pieces, a corpse! When I found

myself with arms, legs, head, gizzard (*sic*)... Put yourself in my shoes! So I cooked them in the washing machine...

- Ah! !

My neighbor thinks for a long moment while my imagination wanders. Then he adds, with obvious sincerity:

- Believe me, sir, I won't be caught playing politics again...

Right now, I feel deeper in the night than ever. In my subterranean world, even words have lost their meaning. Will I be able to make those who have thrown us together into this cesspool understand that my political views have nothing to do with those of this stranger lying against me?

Yet - strangely enough - I don't feel any horror or repulsion towards him. Nothing but astonished commiseration.

But from now on I'm going to recoil every time someone says, "Put yourself in my shoes!"

And I'll never ask anyone to get on mine.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A RED SCARF IN THE NIGHT

(November 15, 1944 - February 6, 1945)

I left the Conciergerie to be imprisoned in Fresnes on Friday, October 13, 1944. I probably wouldn't have remembered it so vividly if it hadn't been the anniversary of the arrest of Jacques de Molay, the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, and the fact that to me there is more than one resemblance between the dreadful Nogaret and the Attorney General Mornet, to whom I'm about to be handed over. These coincidences get my imagination going, even if they don't add up to anything.

But to tell you the truth, I don't care about the past or the future. The present is enough for me, because prison is very different from what I had imagined it to be. There's nothing here to evoke the sumptuous dungeons, spiral staircases and triumphal vaults of Piranesi's prisons, designed to give such a high opinion of themselves to those locked up there. Everything in this factory of the

condemned is atrociously cold, rectilinear and functional. We're crammed three by three into cramped cells, lined up next to each other like shoeboxes. I've never seen anything more mediocre and depressing.

The day I arrived here, I thought I'd stumbled into a train station on vacation. Queues of weary travelers were being steered in various directions by agents in hats, similar to guides pushing groups of tourists towards the catacombs. These travelers, dressed in dusty suits as if they had traveled a long way before arriving here, belonged to all social classes. There were prefects, governors, ministers, ambassadors, generals, admirals, writers, aviation aces, journalists, charm singers, prelates, industrialists, bankers, magistrates, professors of medicine and surgery, boxing and judo champions, police officers, political activists, famous actors, film artists, but also a number of wool pullers, hoodlums and smugglers of all kinds. All in all, an ideal place to widen my circle of acquaintances.

Very quickly - and without knowing how - I found myself locked in a cell already occupied by two internees who had arrived before me. One was a cabinet-maker from Montreuil-sous-Bois by the name of Fernbach; the other was General Colson, who in 1939 had been Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Interior, placing him third in our military hierarchy after General Gamelin and General Georges.

Fernbach has one major concern: the condition of his son Bibi, who is due to undergo surgery for a harelip. He wonders how his wife will cope in his absence. As for General Colson, he doesn't worry about a thing, because a great military leader has to keep a serene eye on the ebb and flow of the battlefield. I wouldn't reproach this excellent man if he didn't always think he was on duty, and if his every reflex wasn't like the ticking of a clock.

When the first cold spells of winter arrived and the temperature inside the prison dropped to six degrees below zero, we had to spend our time scraping with our fingernails the layer of frost that the condensation of humidity constantly reformed on the walls of our cell. To avoid becoming statues of ice ourselves, Fernbach and I got into the habit of curling up under our blankets and getting up as late as possible, since, as remand prisoners, there was no set time for us to leave our benches. But not General I. He gets up every morning at six o'clock sharp, straddles our numb bodies, strides to the window

and drums on the glass, shouting at the top of his voice:

- Get up in there! Get up in there! Nice weather for maneuvers!  
Nice weather for maneuvers!

If we hadn't been so cold, I think we'd have strangled him...

Fernbach told a few of his buddies, so the story made its way around the prison. From now on, I can't enter the courtyard where we do what's derisively called "the promenade" - it's a rectangle about eight by five meters where about twenty prisoners are parked at a time - without being greeted by this rallying cry:

- Fine weather for manoeuvres!

One day, an inmate I hadn't noticed came up to me a little shyly and said, holding out his hand:

- What's up? Good weather for manoeuvres?

I remain forbidden.

- Don't you recognize me? I am Robert... Robert Brasillach...

I was stunned. How could I not recognize him? It's because his face is paler than usual, his hair longer and more disheveled, and - above all! - the fact that I thought he was still at large, sheltering with friends somewhere in Burgundy.

- Ah! They've got you too!" I exclaimed, torn between sadness at knowing he'd been arrested and pleasure at finding someone with whom I could discuss something other than the best way to suture a harelip or the respective merits of the Mauser and the Lebel rifle.

- The truth is, they didn't get me. It was I who gave myself up.

- Are you kidding?

- Not at all! In the second half of August, they had arrested my mother, her second husband, Dr. Maugis, and my grandfather, aged over ninety, and taken them, machine gun in hand, to Sens prison. Only my sister Suzanne escaped because she wasn't there. A friend told me about it...

- In short, they took them hostage?

- There's hardly another word for it. I immediately understood what I had to do.

- Have you surrendered?

- Yes. I couldn't bear the thought of those dearest to me rotting in a dungeon because of me, when they were totally innocent of any wrongdoing. So, of my own accord, I presented myself...

- Where to? Not at your local police station, I hope.

- I'm not crazy! I didn't want to be subjected to the courtesies of the welcoming committee. I went straight to the Préfecture de Police.

There, I was introduced to an attaché to the Prefect's cabinet, a young man by the name of Lefèvre. I told him: "I'm Robert Brasillach, former editor-in-chief of *Je Suis Partout*. I've come to turn myself in as a prisoner. Release my grandfather, my mother and her husband, who were arrested in the most abusive manner. They're in Sens prison. He gave me an embarrassed look...

A wheeled whistle cuts him off. The weekly walk is over; it's time to go back to our cells. I won't know the rest until next week.

Eight days later, Robert wasn't there. It wasn't until the following week that I spotted him in a queue. I sneak up next to him, so as to be locked in the same courtyard.

- You left me alone with Mr. Lefèvre," I said, trying to reconnect. I'd like to know what happens next.

- As luck would have it, this Lefèvre was a student at Normale-Sup, in the same year as me. Yet we didn't know each other: I was in the Lettres section, he in the Sciences. He was annoyed. I can't put you under arrest," he said, consulting a stack of files. I have no warrant for your arrest. Go back to your home."

No way," I replied, "I want you to release mine, and as soon as possible. It was laughable: every police force in France was after me, and I was the one insisting on going to prison! In the end, he satisfied me...

- You have such expressions!

He bursts out laughing.

- After much difficulty, he had me taken to the depot. But mine were released. That was the main thing. Then it was the Noisy-le-Sec camp, then the Depot again, where I ran into you... Finally, I arrived here on October 15.

- And your brothers-in-law?

- They too were arrested. Henri Bardèche is in the Third Division. Suzanne's husband Maurice is still at Drancy. But I expect him to turn up any day now.

Another whistle. How annoying! It's impossible to talk to each other quietly, when we have so much to talk about! We quickly put together a "distress plan". When his lawyer comes to see him, Robert will arrange for me to be summoned by the barker at the same time as him. Since communication permits are hardly controlled, this will

allow us to see each other in a less disjointed fashion. It's a clever plan. But will it work?

\*

A few days later, I hear a call:

- Benoist-Méchin, to the lawyer!

A supervisor comes to get me and leads me to one of the small rooms on the first floor, where I find Robert in the company of his defender. This is how I meet Mr.<sup>e</sup> Jacques Isorni. What a sensitive man! With his fine, curly hair and delicate features, he's full of sympathy and understanding. There's something quivering about him that makes him seem more like a musician than a lawyer. He is well aware of the difficulty of his task. Robert takes advantage of his presence to ask for my testimony on a specific point. His examining magistrate accused him, among other things, of having been released from his prison camp to serve German propaganda. What nonsense! You can see how little they know about Robert's independent and pnmesautier spirit. I know that he was released at the request of Admiral Darlan, who wanted to entrust him with the Commissariat Général du Cinéma. I know this all the more because it was I who advised the Admiral to call on him. But as the Germans made all sorts of difficulties for him, under the pretext that they hadn't been consulted on his appointment, he preferred to withdraw and resume his work at *Je Suis Partout*. It goes without saying that I'll give him all the testimonials he needs. But what weight will they carry?

\*

After this meeting, we didn't see each other for some time. Autumn has arrived. A bitter breeze blows around the prison. Little by little, the trees turn yellow and shed their leaves. I watch them strip bare through the bars of my window, dreaming of the inaccessible city hidden by a curtain of mist, from which we barely hear a whisper.

One evening, at dusk, I'm drawn out of my reverie by an imperceptible nibble. What does this nibbling mean? Is there a rat in the cell? I glance round at the small ceramic gutter framing the floor. (It's a quick tour.) Not a hole. Not a thing. Then perhaps a dead leaf, blown in by the wind through the open window? No more. Suddenly



my eyes make out a small piece of paper that someone has slipped surreptitiously under my door. Is it a message? I hastily pull it to me. It's unwise to leave such things lying around here. It's not one sheet, as I'd first thought, but several, folded in eighths. It's bad gray paper, squared off, like something out of a school notebook. On the outer page I read these lines, traced in tiny handwriting:

*For J. B.-M.*

*The cell is good. I work a lot. A Diary on the last days of the Occupation (I haven't found a title yet). A dialogue between Eteocles and Polynices entitled "Les Frères ennemis." They're too thick to fit under your door. I'll pass them on to you at the earliest opportunity. Also some poems. Here are two. Apart from Isorni, you'll be the first to have read them. I'd like to know what you think. Should we continue? I'm wondering. See you soon.*

*Robert.*

I unfold the pages. One of the poems begins:

*Let the night be mine  
Far from the walls that make up my prison:  
It's enough for them to go away,  
I find my horizons...*

It's beautiful, but the tone still doesn't seem right. I'm more satisfied with the second poem. As we haven't turned on the electricity to save power, I approach the window to read it in the last light of day:

*Here are our goods rising from the mists  
Voici Paris dans la nuit qui s'allume Voici la ville où  
dorent nos trésors. All is hidden behind bars, The red  
trees are those of the Parc de Sceaux. Those we love  
are still breathing.*

*Like a signal at the end of the pier, Like a lantern on  
the restless lighthouse Here's the Tower, tall girl of  
iron. She towers above the clouds Our diamonds, our  
gold and our images, Cargoes sunk since yesterday.*

*O my youth at the bottom of this fog Will you come  
back before it's too late To ward off the storms yet?  
It is only to you that I believe and entrust In this  
autumn where the rain runs endlessly My poor heart  
threatened by death.*

I'd like to reread the last stanza, but it's too dark and the writing is too thin. I stand in front of the window for a long moment, my head resting against the bars, watching the night fall. Snatches of the poem keep running through my head:

*O my youth...  
Only to you do I entrust My poor heart threatened by  
death...*

What melancholy! Yet the feeling growing inside me is not sadness. It contains an element of hope, in other words, joy. I feel as if I'm witnessing the birth of a poet. Oh, I'm not ignoring it: Robert already has a wealth of experience as a writer. Shimmering, laugh-out-loud novels like *Le Voleur d'étincelles*, *L'Enfant de la nuit* and *Le Marchand d'oiseaux*; fiery chronicles like *Les Sept couleurs* and *Comme le temps passe*; reviews of rare quality that he has assembled under the title *Les Quatre Jeudis*, not to mention *Présence de Virgile* and an *Anthologie de la poésie grecque*. But all this can be swept away, forgotten overnight, like so many other books. But this... this is something else...

I turn the poor little sheet of squared paper over and over in my fingers, inscribed with words I can no longer read. What if the tragic pressure of events were to give birth to that unique, inimitable song that is the true mark of the poet? That would be too good! It would justify us. Far more than any politician's declaration or historian's commentary ever could. But that would require Robert to find both his personal accent and the means to express, through it, what we all feel. I find it hard to believe that he can. And yet he does! What if it was this mysterious alchemy that was taking place here, within our walls, in a cell not far from mine? But will he have the strength? And if he finds the strength, will we give him the time?

The next day, while tinkering with my old Canadian, I spend most of the day meditating on the poetic phenomenon. To think that

some people think it consists of rhyming words! The poet's role is far more significant: his effect is to conquer time by erecting impassable barriers against the gray tide of oblivion. How does he achieve this? That remains a mystery. But that it does is beyond doubt. Thanks to Homer, we still hear the lament of Achilles in front of his tent; thanks to Pindar, we still see the horses of Arcésilas galloping on a sparkling Libyan beach. What neither victory nor monuments of stone can provide, as they endure the slow decay of the centuries, the poet brings, through his power to *eternalize* everything he touches.

A formidable and sacred power, when you think about it, perhaps the greatest of all. Malherbe was particularly aware of this, and proclaimed it in terms of proud density:

*By the Muses only  
Man is free from the Fates And that which  
bears their mark Abides forever.  
By them tracing the history Of your laborious  
deeds, I'll defend your memory From unjust  
demise;  
Et quelque assaut que te faites L 'oubli par qui  
tout s'efface, Ta louange dans mes vers D  
'amarante couronnée, N'aura sa fin terminée  
Qu'en celle de T'univers.*

Is it any wonder, then, that killing a poet is a crime that posterity will never forgive, if it's the biggest mistake a politician can make?



Over the next few days, our clandestine correspondence continued, in the form of small squared sheets slipped under my door. Fun after fun, I received the poems entitled *Les Noms sur les murs*, *Psaume I*, *Psaume II*, *Le Camarade*, *Psaume III*, *Psaume IV*. I'm deeply impressed. If the Administration knew the content of the bills I receive, they'd be amazed! Poems? I have to hide them carefully to prevent them from being confiscated or destroyed.

For they are poems! There's no doubt that Robert's poetic vocation is emerging, asserting itself and taking off. I witness this genesis, incredulous at first, then more and more amazed: he has found his own accent, a simple, unadorned song that follows exactly

the beat of his heart.

Around November 15, I received a new poem, which came as a real shock. It's entitled *Chant pour André Chénier* (1794-1944) and begins as follows:

*Standing on the heavy tombereau, Through  
overheated Paris, In the forehead the pallor of the  
dungeons In the heart the last song of Orpheus  
You were on your way to the scaffold O my  
brother with his collar undone!*

This time, there can be no doubt: he knows he's going to die. And since he knows it, he has chosen to die not as a critic or novelist, but as a poet. The key word has been spoken: André Chénier.

Perhaps the most admirable thing about Robert's work is that there is no artifice, no calculation in this identification. He does not take Chénier as his model. One would look in vain in his poems for the slightest reminiscence of the author of *Les iambes*. As far as I am able to judge, the author of *Comme le temps passe* has done nothing to become "the André Chénier of his time. When he set out into the world in search of fellow travelers who could share his dazzling vision of life, he had no idea that his very last comrade would be a beheaded poet. It was the symmetry of their situations that led to the similarity of their fates. Simply, at the end of his journey, he met Chénier, who was waiting to accompany him on the last stage of his ordeal. From now on, their two shadows will walk side by side. There is a heart-rending parallelism in this encounter, which is reflected in the last stanza of the poem:

*And those whom Von leads to the post In the  
icy early morning, On the forehead your  
dungeon pallor, In the heart the last song of  
Orpheus, You reach out to them without a  
word O my brother in the untucked collar...*

- Benoist-Méchin, to the lawyer!

As I'm not expecting either Marcel Héraud, Jean-Louis Aujol or Jacqueline Marson today, this faithful cohort is rushing around me, so it must be Robert who arranged with the barker to get me downstairs, taking advantage of a visit from Jacques Isorni. But the supervisor who is supposed to open my door is slow in coming. By the time I reached the first floor,<sup>e</sup> Isorni had already left. Robert and I linger for a few minutes in the lawyers' visiting room. Not wanting to talk to him about his poems, as my impressions are still too fresh, I ask him how his trial is going.

- Oh, you know," he replies with a disillusioned smile, "I'm under no illusions. I've only seen my examining magistrate once. He had all my articles on his table. There were loads of them. I never thought I'd written so many! I told myself that if I had to comment on them one by one, it would take years. Just think! The judge simply showed them to me and asked if I admitted having written them. But when I tried to explain how and why I had written them, he threw up his hands and said: "No, no! You'll explain at the hearing!" I immediately understood that I wouldn't be allowed to speak, that I'd be silenced. That's a shame. But what can you do? It was already like that under the Terror.

- André Chénier, too, had little to say...

At these words, he shudders and straightens his head. Beneath his tousled hair, two deep-set brown eyes gaze at me through his round glasses.

- That's why he sang! Torrential speeches were reserved for the tribunes and demagogues of the Assembly. What's left of them today?

- Nothing. Who still knows Brissot or Thuriot?

- While its song remains, handed down from generation to generation.

- Do you like Chénier a lot?

- I don't think he's one of the greatest French poets. But he's undoubtedly the one whose destiny was the most tragic. How did you expect him to live, at a time when France had to choose between the Jacobins and Coblenz!

- What about today?

- It's all the same. We're asked to choose between the Resistance and Sigmaringen. I refuse. There are men everywhere. The proof is that there are martyrs everywhere. Men who fight and suffer to make

hope triumph...

- And also many men who see, in the dagger, the only hope of the earth.

- I loved life too much to share this opinion I would have liked to reconcile all the youth of my time in a great solar festival.

- And here we are, emblazoned in

*... these parks where death grazes us,  
And where the axe draws lots...*

- Funny parks!" exclaims Robert with a burst of laughter. I'd prefer the Alhambra in Granada or the Aguedal in Meknes. It wouldn't be so cold there.

- It's true that it's freezing here.

How I'd love to continue this conversation with Robert! But then the door half-opens and the head warden's face appears in the crack. There's nothing poetic about him. We call him "Babar" because of his stout build. He's the terror of the inmates.

- What the hell are you doing here?" he growls, giving us a sultry look. Return to your cells immediately! Or I'll give you five days in solitary!

Solitary confinement is the ultimate punishment, a prison within a prison. Those who haven't been there won't know what it's like. A dark, icy dungeon, with a few extra bullies thrown in for good measure. That threat alone is enough to get us out of here.

Now the days have become very short and the nights inordinately long. General Coison and Fernbach left long ago. They have been replaced successively by a very young man, who is Bony's nephew (I'll tell his story later, because it's worth telling) and Henri Lémery, the former senator from Guadeloupe. With this amiable and talkative man, all the sweetness of the West Indies enters my cell. His housekeeper sends him parcels of mangoes, pineapples and vanilla pods, all very fragrant but not very nutritious. He also has a multicolored silk scarf tied around his head to keep out the drafts. Despite all these precautions, he's

visibly losing weight and shivering from the cold. His complexion, already blotchy, is slowly turning green. But he never complains. Sitting cross-legged on his bat- flanc like an Arab storyteller, he kills time by telling me about his arrival in Paris, his life as a student and his encounters with Verlaine at *La Closerie des Lilas*. He knows many of the poems by heart, which he recites in a lilting accent:

*The sky is so blue, so calm!  
An alble, pal-dessus le toit Belce sa palme...*

or, in a sadder tone:

*Un gland sleep noil Tombe sul ma vie Dolmez  
tout espoil Dolmez toute envie!*

*I no longer see the link  
I pels the memoile  
Of evil and good  
O la tliste histoile*

*Je suis un belceau Que une main balance Au  
deux d' un caveau : Silence, silence !*

He knew almost all the poets of the late 19th<sup>e</sup> century, including Samain, Laforgue, Viellé-Griffin and Tristan Corbière, whom he particularly admired. I've never talked as much about poetry as I do here. Fortunately for him, he's only staying a short time at Fresnes. I'll always have fond memories of him.



The beginnings of my education come to furnish my idleness. But it can't make me forget the cold, which bites your nose, ears, hands and feet like a voracious beast. I wonder how Robert, by definition a child of the sun, can stand this temperature. I haven't seen him for several days. I look for him in vain along the empty corridors, as the cold discourages the inmates from going out for a walk. Perhaps he's ill?

*Shadow, companion of the mists, Where are*

*you? What's become of you?*

Mr.<sup>e</sup> Isorni, whom I met yesterday on my way to pick up a parcel, reassured me of his health. He told me that his case was on hold, because no one wanted to take the prosecution's seat. That's understandable: calling for a poet's head is not an enviable task. For if a poet has the power to "weave praise that lasts forever", he also has the power to place an endless curse on the memory of those who seek to bring him down. So, as everyone recuses themselves, perhaps he will escape? Perhaps Chénier's shadow will move away from him?

- The chance is so small that it would be foolhardy to cling to it," Isorni replies to my anxious questions. In the end, Robert will always find someone to condemn him. You don't know what today's courts are like!

If only he were allowed to speak, to explain himself freely, perhaps he could convince his judges? But they won't give him the time he needs. They'll judge him on the fly, without knowing him, simply on the basis of the idea they have of him. For them, it's all about silencing ■ the singer of fascism".

Ah, if they really knew him, they'd realize what a mistake they're about to make. Fascist, Robert? I'm sure that if you asked him: "What is fascism?" he wouldn't know what to answer. For him, fascism was never a political doctrine. Rather, it was a great wave of enthusiasm and hope, a *Risorgimento* of European youth fighting to establish a purer, more fraternal world. A great surge of heroism and generosity, seizing in turn the most disinterested elements of the continent. Even before he was old enough to join their movement, he saw the Reprobates of the Baltic set out to storm the Curonian Spit; D'Annunzio's legionnaires plant their standards on the ramparts of Fiume ; Mussolini's Squadri singing their way up the Capitoline steps; Balbo's aviators conquering the Atlantic; the Hitler Youth's torchlight retreats filling the streets of Berlin with a trail of fire; the heroic defense of the Alcazar Cadets; the allegorical songs of José Antonio Primo de Rivera's Phalangists; Degrelle's Rexists waving their armorial banners over the medieval towns of Flanders; the rise of Szalassi's Hungarian Arrow Crosses, that of Codréanu's Iron Guard, encamped on the advances of Trajan's *Limes*. And then the years



of apotheosis: the Berlin Olympics, the Nuremberg Congresses, the Triumph of the Will, crowds roaring with joy under cathedrals of light... How could he not have let himself be swept away by the torrent of youth that made the continent tremble, while our country sank into ignominy and scandal, and most of those who were leading us to the abyss appeared more and more as what they really were: "little piles of mud decorated with the Legion of Honor<sup>1</sup> ." Wasn't that enough to make you furious?

But what's the point of evoking that past, now that it's gone? Even if his judges were to let Robert explain himself, they'd either not listen to him, or plug their ears...

I climb back into my cell, sweating more than ever, only to find that it's snowing. Outside, everything is covered in a white shroud, with a few telegraph poles emerging from the distance. I think of the heavy price that French intelligence has already paid in the "purge". Here, after Suarez\*, Henri Béraud and Paul Chack. Outside, Drieu La Rochelle, Alexis Carrel, Aristide Maillol, Paul Valéry. For the author of *La Jeune Parque*, too, we'll one day know how things went. (But this is not my personal memory.) I also wonder where Céline is, whom I met shortly before my arrest, in the company of Le Vigan. Is he continuing his dance through the ruins of German cities, amidst a string of volcanoes?

\*

On January 10, I meet Robert again, on the staircase leading down to the first floor. He's surrounded by a small group of friends, among whom I recognize Guy Crouzet, Well Allot and Lucien Combelle. As soon as he sees me, he comes over and offers me his hand. He's always so cheerful and carefree, but today I find him more serious than usual.

- Have you seen it? Paul Chack!

I raise my shoulders in helplessness. He was shot yesterday. After Suarez, he's the second. Who will be the third?

- I received my indictment a few days ago," he says. It's incredible what I'm accused of! Advocate General Reboul - after all, it's him! - seems to attach great importance to an article in which I express my sympathy for the German soldiers defending Europe against the Bolshevik stampede. It seems that this is, par excellence, a crime against the fatherland! What disgusts me is

not the accusation itself, but the fact that it's being levelled at me by a man who would think it only natural that a Frenchman should be wreathing the soldiers of the Red Army! This has inspired me to write a poem entitled *Le Jugement des juges* (*The Judgment of the Judges*). I'll send it to you as soon as I've finished it. I've only written the first two stanzas. In it, I'll say that there will never be enough saints to judge all magistrates...

- Saints?

- Yes. The more I think about it, the more I believe that only a saint is pure enough to have the right to judge his fellow men. It's true that I have sympathy for the German soldiers. But my sympathy goes out to all those who were sacrificed, to those who were shot on all sides. To the maquisards, to the deportees, not excluding the boys who passed through here before us. I'll never side with the shooters...

A supervisor's hat looms up the stairs. Once again, we have to leave.

It's amazing how every sentence of Robert's gives me something to think about! It seems to me that he is undergoing a profound transformation day by day, "Only a saint..." And yet he's never been shy about passing peremptory judgments in the past. Does this make him feel remorseful? The thought disturbs me. Because I won't insult him by believing that this is what lawyers complacently call "a defense system". So, will he deny himself, like so many others, when he takes the stand?

In spite of myself, I ask myself a question that hasn't occurred to me until now: is it *really* so hard to give up on life? And if so, will I myself have the courage to remain faithful to my convictions, even if they are only compatible with death? I have a strong feeling that the most painful part of our ordeal is not the cold, nor the imprisonment, nor the separation from our loved ones. It's the departure of our comrades at dawn, and the terrible battle we have to wage against the most ineradicable thing in ourselves: the instinct for self-preservation.

Something - why deny it? - surprises me in Robert's latest writings: a certain tone of resignation. He seems to have lost the will to fight. Here, despite the entanglement of their fates, he is

truly the antithesis of the author of *La Jeune Captive*. Chénier struggles, bites, claws, covers his tormentors in infamy, comparing his blood "to the burning pitch that resurrects dying torches". The violence of his fury is reminiscent of Agnappa d'Aubigné's *Tragiques*, foreshadowing Hugo's *Châtiments*. Nothing of the sort in Brasillach's work. The last poems are painful farewell songs, but full of serenity. There is no hint of revolt. Not only does he seem resigned to his fate, but he identifies his pain with that felt by the long procession of inmates who preceded him here and inscribed their names on the walls of his cell. There's nothing more honorable than a victor reaching out to the vanquished. But can a vanquished man hold out his hand to the victor, without seeming to beg for mercy?

Does he really believe that those who arrested his mother to force her to give herself up are "fraternal adversaries"?

"

Our next meeting took place on January 17 and, like the previous ones, it was by chance. At first sight, I'm struck by his calm.

- This time it's done," he tells me evenly. The hearing has been set for the 19th. The day after tomorrow. Reboul has silenced his scruples as an honest man. What a laugh! Besides, I feel ready. I know what I have to defend. But I also know that my judges won't understand me.

- And... you accept?

- Ah, to accept! That's the big word... Yes, I accept my fate. It's been harder than I thought, but I think I've managed. But accepting isn't enough. You have to go further, open your heart to all those who have followed the same path, whatever side they're on, identify with them...

- Why?

- Because their suffering was the same. And also for a deeper, more exhilarating reason...

- Which one?

- It's an idea I didn't express until late in life. But my time in prison and the rereading of my articles have made me realize that I've always carried it with me. You see, whatever the appearances,

I've never done what people call *politics*. I put my hope - and God knows how ardently! - in the Fascist International, which I now know never existed, because I thought I saw in it, not a political movement, but a youth insurrection. Today, fascism is portrayed in a caricatured light, because we've forgotten what it was at its origins: an outburst of hope. For a time, young people truly believed they were going to reshape the world. And then, this ideal was confiscated. Confiscated by profiteers, schemers, opportunists, by all those who pride themselves on representing "Power". But others also fought and sacrificed their lives to a hope. And their hope, too, has been confiscated. I feel in solidarity with them, because their adventure was the same. Everywhere, in every camp, youth has been betrayed. The only difference between us and them is that events are teaching us this, while they, for the most part, don't know it yet...

I listen carefully. What he says makes me see things in a light I hadn't thought of.

- I'll never be on the side of the powers that be, the gunmen, the executioners. I am, and always have been, on the side of youth, not because it professes this or that opinion, but because it is the party of hope and the future. I know that the day will come when young people will refuse to be betrayed, to let themselves be "robbed of their spark". It will raise its head and know that it is capable of drawing everything from itself, without listening to the voices of those who think only of taking advantage of its candor. Then it will truly be spring... I only made one mistake: I greeted it too soon...

He speaks without raising his voice and without a shadow of emphasis. He's way above that. And I look at him and think I've never understood him so well: in a few days, he'll be judged as a traitor, even though he's nothing more than the singer of a betrayed youth.

- Excuse me," he says. I'm waiting for Mr<sup>e</sup> Isorni. We have to work together, as the deadline is approaching.

The end of this day and the next seem hopelessly long. Slanting snowflakes fall behind my bars. They accumulate slowly on the window sill. There's something soothing about their silent fall. Eventually, I fall asleep.



I'm startled awake by the sound of a key being inserted into the lock. A supervisor enters.

- So, do you sleep?

- Of course!

It's still dark. What time can it be?

- We've already called you twice. Aren't you ready yet?

I rub my eyes and wonder what's happening to me.

- Called? Why call?

- Weren't you told you were extracted this morning?

Excerpt? This is what we call those who are taken to the Mousetrap, to appear either before their examining magistrate or before a court of justice. This can't be the case for me, since my trial only takes place in the afternoon and at the Palais du Luxembourg. I don't understand it at all.

- Let's go, let's go! Move it! I've got no time to lose.

As I sleep fully dressed, I'm quickly ready. But I don't like going to the Palais without having cleaned up.

- What time is it?

The supervisor leans over the gangway railing.

- 6 h 5. You should have been downstairs twenty minutes ago.

- I'm sure it's a mistake. Couldn't you check? There's no point in me coming down if...

- Come on, don't make a fuss or I'll write you up.

I button up my Canadian and descend to the first floor. In the lobby of the 1<sup>re</sup> division, there's something that's neither day nor night: a half-darkness filled with a damp fog that seems to ooze from the walls. Some thirty chilly shadows are lined up between the two rails that run the length of the hall. They look like a line of damned waiting to cross the River Styx. Although I know almost everyone in the prison, I don't recognize anyone. What's got me so numb? Sleep, cold or the icy vapor that envelops me? One of the shadows catches sight of me and makes a gesture of surprise. I approach it: it's Robert!

- What are you doing here?" he asks.

- I wouldn't know. Do you?

- Oh, I'm going to appear before my judges. Today's the day.

It's true! Today is January 19. I'd forgotten all about it. Now I

don't know what to say. It's hard to talk to a man who may, in a few hours, be cut off from the living. As much as I refuse to admit it, who can assure me that this isn't my last conversation with him? When faced with such a threat, all words sound false and lose their naturalness. They seem to undergo a kind of refraction that distorts their meaning. I give him a look that I'd like to be as affectionate as possible.

- All the same," he says, "it's great to meet you here, just this morning. It's going to bring me luck!

Out of modesty, I make a gesture of denial, which I immediately repress. Why contradict him?

He's wearing a navy-blue overcoat with the collar turned up, and a red scarf, its vermilion bursting like a poppy in the general greyness. The edge of the muffler extends a little beyond his coat, tracing a thin red border around his neck. The image is so terrible that I can't take my eyes off it. My throat tightens. I feel I must speak, speak at all costs to mask my dismay.

- That seems pretty quick to me," I throw out as if taking the plunge.

- Fast? I've been under arrest for six months now, and my examining magistrate has only managed to question me once... Every time I've tried to speak, he's stopped me and said: "You'll have to explain yourself at the hearing. Every time I've tried to speak, he's stopped me and said: "You can explain yourself at the hearing.

- I know that. Mr<sup>e</sup> Isorni told me.

- Dear Jacques was admirable in his patience and tenacity.

- Will there at least be several hearings?

- Oh no! There's only one hearing scheduled. I'll start by spending six hours at the Mousetrap, locked in a small cabin that smells of filth and urine. Just enough to get me in condition. After that, I'll be taken to court, where I'll be tried between five and seven.

- It's so short!

He smiles.

- Bah! everything's short judgments, youth, life...

- Not yours! Not yours!" I protested.

Why do I say this? I want to encourage him. But words seem as inconsistent as the steam coming out of my goatee.

- Who knows? See Suarez, Béraud, Paul Chack.

- It's not the same for you!

- Why is that?

I'd like to say to him: You're a poet. You can't kill a poet. After all, what do I know? I merely remark:

- This is no time to be gloomy.

He bursts out laughing. He looks like a student on his way to an exam.

- I'm not the type for black ideas! The black flag, yes. But clear ideas...

- And the road songs...

- That's it! You have to know how to die young. Robert Brasillach at seventy? You can see it from here! Take my word for it! It's not in your interest to grow old.

I smile back. Her good humor is contagious.

He's the one who comforts me. Does he really realize his situation?...

- Spring won't be long in coming... I say, to avoid that intolerable thing between us: silence.

- Of course you can.

A shadow passes over his forehead.

- But not for everyone, not for everyone...

He knows exactly what he's doing! The gaiety he spreads around him is all the more admirable. If the same fate should one day befall me, may God grant me the grace to leave like this...

- Line up the extracts!" shouts the brigadier on duty, who proceeds with the roll call.

At the mention of his name, each inmate heads for the large gate leading to the exit. As they pass through, Robert raises his hand and bids me a final farewell. I'm left alone between the rails.

- And you, what the hell are you doing here?" asks the brigadier in a rogue tone.

I'm so absorbed in my own thoughts that I don't even think of answering him. He and the supervisor have a quick talk. I don't even listen. Day breaks over the rooftops, or rather, night dies. Suddenly, my name, uttered in a threatening tone, brings me back down to earth.

- Ho! Benoist-Méchin, are you asleep? You have no business here. Go back to your cell. And don't let us catch you again!

Just as I thought: I'd been "extracted" by mistake. A fortunate error which enabled me to speak to Robert once again...

I go back up to my cell. I take Robert's poems out of the linen folder where I keep my papers. As soon as it's light enough, I reread them slowly. Particularly *Un camarade*, which corresponds so exactly to the scene I've just experienced that it takes on a premonitory quality:

*We saw him walk through the door We saw him turn  
his face away We saw him in the dead of night Walk  
through the prison.*

*We've seen it like so many others Out of these hours  
and towards the judgments, Whether they're counted  
among us or not They've gone, so fraternally*

*We have seen him towards the edicts of men On this  
rotting autumn morning, We have seen him, like who  
we are, Walking quietly and even a little laughing.*

*We have seen him in this oozing dawn, We have seen  
him among the good-byes, And we have begun our  
waiting: Will we see him when evening comes?*

Yes, will we see him again? Ah, let the evening come, let the evening come, let us at least know what we're in for! This wait reminds me of the anxious hours I spent at Matignon, when the lives of a hundred hostages were hanging in the balance and I didn't know whether to speed up or slow down the hands of my watch. But then I could plead their cause, intervene on their behalf, even though they were strangers, perhaps even enemies. Today, when it's a friend, I'm reduced to impotence, and that's very bitter. And to think that I thought nothing serious could happen to me now that I was in prison!

\*

The day expires in its turn. Shadows gather in the courtyards. I hear the 7 o'clock bell at the church in Rungis. Standing by my door, my ear glued to the eyecup, I wait for the "extracts of the day" to return. Suddenly, my attention is drawn to significant movement. Rushing footsteps along the corridors. Doors



slamming. Voices calling out to one another. It's "them" returning from the Palais.

- So, Georges, how are you?
- Not too bad. Fifteen years old.
- What about you?
- Perpetuity.

- And Robert?

Silence. Then someone says these words, in a low voice:

- For Robert, it's the chains...

My knees buckle I sit on my bench. They dared! They dared! Since they didn't hesitate to condemn a poet, who will they spare?

A long sigh runs through the I<sup>re</sup> division. Not exactly a sigh: a long, painful shudder intermingled with rales, as if hope itself had just been murdered. Robert, dear Robert, I'll never see you again!...

\*

Yes, I'll see him again. By chance, as always.

February 4, around noon. The barker calls me "to the parcel". I go down to the first floor. As it's very busy, I have to wait my turn, standing between the two rails where I took leave of him on the morning of his trial. I'm standing right in front of his cell, but I'm not allowed to go near it. I know he's there, chained, behind the door whose wicket is open because soup is about to be distributed.

Suddenly, his face appears in the frame of the wooden square. He sees me and smiles. Isorm described this smile as "angelic". I don't know if he's right, as I've never met an angel, but I can assure you it's the smile of a soul already completely free of earthly contingencies. When they come to take him to the stake, it won't be a tortured man they're taking away: it'll be a martyr.

An overseer watches me out of the corner of his eye, ready to pounce on me if I utter the slightest word, as it is forbidden<sup>f</sup> to speak to those condemned to death. I raise my hand to greet Robert, but remain silent. What prevents me from going up to him is neither concern for the rules nor fear of punishment, however severe. It's the feeling of being separated from him by an immeasurable distance. What his smile expresses is beyond the

help of words. And then, as suddenly as it appeared, his face disappears and all I see in its place is a small square of light.

I'm so upset that I go back up to my cell without thinking of picking up my parcel, and stay there for a long time, withdrawn into myself, as if I'd just received communion.

In the meantime, M<sup>e</sup> Isorni sent me, via Jacqueline Marson, a letter that Robert wrote to me the day after he was sentenced:

*January 20, 1945.*

*Dear Friend,*

*First of all, I'd like to thank you for the support you've given me, which has been extremely useful on the particular point raised by the prosecution. As for the rest, I have nothing to say. The newspaper Combat gave a fairly accurate account. Other newspapers, of course, made me say things I never said, but on the whole my latest "Argus" is not too bad (excuse the vanity of the man of letters!).*

*If it weren't for my family, I might not care. I think of my mother's grief with immense sorrow. But I tell myself that I tried to stand my ground, and that's what life's all about.*

*I'm happy to have met you, happy with our shared thoughts, our prisoner conversations.*

*I send you my love.*

*Rober*

Forty-eight hours later, dawn broke under a cloudy sky. It's still snowing. It's February 6, 1945. The entire division is plunged into silence, that crushing silence, impossible to confuse with any other, which we know precedes a capital execution. There are no voices, no sound of doors, no rolling of carts on the corridor rails that usually announce coffee distribution. It seems as if death itself has entered the prison.

I hear the sound of footsteps heading for the special area.

A long silence.

Again, the sound of footsteps.

Then I hear a very clear voice shouting:

- Au revoir Béraud! Au revoir Well! Goodbye Combelle...

The sound of footsteps fades. It's all over now.

We hear the rumble of a cart on the rails of a passageway. Life

returns to normal. But as of this morning, France has one less poet. There's nothing to be moved by. The world will see others...

I know for a fact that Robert was mowed down by twelve bullets from a platoon fire. Isorni, who accompanied him to the end, described the scene to me. But I could never imagine it. The color of his red scarf, protruding from his navy-blue overcoat, and the bloody thread he traced around his neck, are so deeply etched in my retina that I can't do anything about it.

As far as I'm concerned, Brasillach wasn't shot.

He was guillotined.

Like his brother with the low collar.

From now on, nothing can keep them apart.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

(November 1944)

Fernbach, the cabinetmaker, and General Colson had left my cell at the onset of winter. They had been replaced by a young man of eighteen who was Inspector Bony's nephew. Afflicted with clubfoot, his face wizened and his hair bleached, he had come to flop down at the foot of my bunk like a bird at the end of its tether. He wasn't just physically exhausted: there was a glint of panic in his eyes. Hunted, suspicious of everything and believing in nothing, he wasn't even looking for the protection of an outstretched hand. He wanted only one thing: to find a quiet corner where he could die in peace.

But peace doesn't come as easily as we think. As I watched him sleep, curled up under his blanket, I noticed that he was riddled with nervous twitches. At first, I thought it was the cold, but I was wrong. Every now and then, he'd let out a muffled groan, and when he woke up, his eyes were rimmed with anguish.

What ill-treatment had been inflicted on him to put him in such a state? I would have liked to know. But it wasn't by questioning him that I could find out.

He didn't speak to me for almost five days, except to exchange small talk. He remained on the defensive. I didn't insist.

After a week, having regained a little strength and seeing that I was sharing the contents of my parcels with him, he began to tame himself. One morning he was so bold as to say to me:

- Is it really so wrong, what I've done? Do you really think I

deserve to die?

*To deserve death!* The word seemed immense.

- Nobody *deserves to die*," I replied. It's something that happens, like an illness, an accident...

- And yet, as a former minister, you must know the law.

I was tempted to reply that *being subject to* the law and *knowing it* were not the same thing, and that what's more, the retroactive provisions under which we were confined had no legal value in the eyes of jurists. But that would only have added to his confusion. So I confined myself to saying:

- How do you want me to answer that? I don't know what you've done. And me, other people's business...

He glanced at me suspiciously. Perhaps he thought he'd been put in my cell so I could make him talk? The prison administration sometimes has its tricks...

Was it my lack of curiosity that gave him confidence? Was it the need to free himself from the secret that was suffocating him? In any case, one evening, when the shadows were gathering, he said to me in a strangled voice:

- Would you like me to tell you everything?

- I don't want anything, dear. But if it makes you feel better...

He ran a hand through his hair. Words were hard to come by. Finally, he made up his mind.

- Is it my fault I'm Bony's nephew?" he began, almost in a whisper. In my family, he was considered a great man. He'd had his name and picture on the front page of the newspapers. Before the war, he'd been in charge of I don't know what investigation, and a minister had told him he was the first policeman in France<sup>1</sup>. So you can imagine! After that, people greeted him in the street. He spoke like a boss. No one dared contradict him. One day, when he came to lunch at my parents', he told them, referring to me: "Little Daniel, he's not stupid.

1. In 1933, Robert Bony, then a Sûreté inspector, was asked by the public prosecutor's office to investigate the Stavisky affair. He had so successfully disguised the assassination of Councillor Prince as a suicide that Mr. Henri Chéron, then Minister of Justice, publicly congratulated him on his zeal. The scandal culminated in the shooting at Place de la Concorde on February 6, 1934.

Give him to me. I'll make someone of him. - What?" asked my father. - The most beautiful thing in the world: a policeman. For my parents, this was unexpected, since they weren't rich. So they said to him: "That's good. Take care of him.

He stopped for a moment and spat into his handkerchief. Did he

have something in his lungs? I couldn't have sworn he didn't, just by looking at his pale complexion and feverish cheekbones.

- And then the war came. My father was sent to the front. My mother went with me to stay with an aunt in the South of France. When we came back to Paris, my father was dead and there were Germans everywhere. Uncle Robert had done well. So he said to me: "Now's not the time to sit around twiddling your thumbs. I promised your father I'd take care of you. You'll never make a runner anyway, with your twisted leg. Come along with me. I'll teach you the trade."

"My uncle had hooked up with an ex-mobster by the name of Lafont. A big, burly guy who was good with the Fritzes. Between them, they had requisitioned a house on rue Lauriston. You," said my uncle, "go to reception. You'll have all the customers fill in a form, giving the visitor's name and the reason for the visit. Then you'll tell them which floor they need to go to. Since there's an elevator, you won't have to do much walking."

"I never knew exactly what was going on in the house. One day when I wanted to ask my uncle, he slapped me in the face. This is what we make here," he replied, "and if anyone asks, you'll tell them you don't know." I didn't do it again. Besides, I didn't care.

"The customers were numerous. They were almost all from the upper classes. There were counts, countesses, marquises, dukes. Baskets of flowers and cases of champagne were brought in all the time. I heard Lafont liked it. Business was good. My uncle had a camel-hair coat and crocodile shoes made for himself. He had nice cars and gasoline tickets to spare. I never knew what they were up to upstairs. From time to time, I'd notice that customers who'd gone upstairs didn't come back down. But as the house had two exits, I assumed they'd gone out the other door. From time to time, too, my uncle would go out on an "operation". I wished he'd taken me with him. I was getting tired of always sitting at the reception desk.

But he never wanted to. To go into operations, you need men who are not afraid of the cold and who know how to run," he told me, "not kids who limp along like lame ducks. Later, to stretch your legs, I'll have you do some shadowing."

"Business was booming. Uncle Robert was happy. From time to time, he'd give me a carton of cigarettes. Then, without warning, the Liberation came. We started burning a lot of papers. Then, around August 20, my uncle handed me five thousand francs and said:

"Now get the hell out of here, and don't let anyone see you here again. - But where am I going to go? - You're on your own. And if anyone asks about me, you'll say I've gone abroad, that it's been a year since you've seen me."

"Five thousand francs was great! I was going to be able to do the java. I went to bang the bell at a black restaurant, at the home of a friend of Lafont. It was fun. No matter how much I waved at him, he pretended not to recognize me. The room was all decked out with tricolor ribbons. I went back the next day. I was getting worried. I only had five hundred francs left. As he handed me the bill, the owner said, "Now beat it. We're changing clientele."

"I went for a walk. When I got to Place des Ternes, I saw some guys selling newspapers at the mouth of the metro. They weren't newspapers like the others. They were dirty, badly printed and only had two pages. They were called *Libération*, or something like that. I bought one. When I unfolded it, what I saw on the front page made my blood run cold. It said in big letters: "The first cart: the Bony-Lafont strip. A substantial bounty is offered to anyone who can arrest the leaders and accomplices of the Rue Lauriston gang." I felt like shouting: "You bastards! Don't you know that my uncle has been named the first policeman in France! That's nothing!" At first I thought the paper was printed by a gang of hoodlums who had a grudge against my uncle over some pre-war affair. But then I took a closer look and saw that it was serious. There was a full-page portrait of my uncle, Lafont and a number of guys I'd seen on Rue Lauriston. There was even a price on my head! They were offering fifty thousand francs to the man who could put me away! I laughed to myself, thinking that my face was worth so much with only five francs in my pocket. Then, suddenly, I got scared. What if someone recognized me, right there at the subway entrance? I preferred to get out. But there was nothing I could do: I still had my face. I couldn't tear it off! Anyone could see it, recognize me, report me!

"In town, things were starting to tug. There were more and more flags on the balconies. Where should I go? I looked for the less busy avenues. I turned my head away when I saw someone. I waited for the night to hide me from passers-by. But night was still a long way off. I felt like everyone was staring at me. So I said to myself: "There's only one place where I'll be safe, and that's at my mother's house. My mother had remarried a retired officer. She lived in a



bungalow in La Ferté-sous-Jouarre. I went to the Gare de l'Est: there were no more trains.

"But there were lots of cars and trucks heading east. Mostly German cars. I hitchhiked. A car stopped and agreed to pick me up, so I sat down next to the driver. Unfortunately! It was a French car. There was an issue of the newspaper with my portrait on the back seat. If only the guy had known! I was sweating profusely. I hoped it would make my beard grow. But as you can see, I don't have much of one...

He stopped, caught in a coughing fit. I filled his quart with the toilet flush and handed it to him. God knows how many billions of microbes it contained! He might as well drink it. At this point...

- But tell me, sir, am I boring you by telling you all this?

- Not at all. I'm all ears. I'll tell you what I think when you're done.

He cleared his throat and spat into his handkerchief again. Since he'd started talking, night had fallen. He was crouched on his bench, his back against the wall, so that I could hardly see him. All I could hear was his voice. I feared the icy, sooty wall wasn't healthy for him, but I didn't want to interrupt.

- When I reached the entrance to La Ferté, I asked the driver for a lift. All I could think of was getting out of here before he recognized me. It was finally night. It was less dangerous. I arrived like a lost tank in front of my mother's house. I was saved!

He sighed.

- Everything was closed: the door, the shutters. No light anywhere. I said to myself: Shit! They've gone! What's going to happen to me? I banged against a shutter. After a while, my mother came to open the door, a candle in her hand. There was no light because the Fifis had sabotaged the house. The power lines had been ripped out. She was in her nightdress.

"When she recognized me, she said: "You little wretch! What are you doing here? Get out of here right now! If my husband ever sees you, he'll take you to the gendarmerie himself. If only to collect the bonus."

"What could I do? I couldn't stay in La Ferté, where everyone knew me. There was only one solution: go back to Paris. I tried hitchhiking again. But while there were plenty of cars heading east, there were none going in the opposite direction. No one was in a

hurry to say hello to the Yanks. I was tired. I hadn't eaten since the day before. I was broke. I took my courage in both hands. It took me all night and all day. By the time I got to the Porte de Vincennes, I couldn't take it anymore and my feet were bleeding. I wanted to sleep. But where to go? I knew of a small hotel near Place Pigalle. But I didn't trust the owner. I said to myself: first of all, you don't have the money for a place to stay. Secondly, you'll have to show your ID card, with your photo. You'll be recognized. You're going to get yourself into trouble.

"It could have been 8 o'clock in the evening. What could I do? I had only one idea: to sleep, to sleep peacefully, without being afraid. Then an idea came to me. I remembered that you can spend the night in churches, as long as you don't stand out. But which one? I only knew one: the Sacré-Cœur, because my parents had lived in the rue Saint-Vincent when I was a kid. I climbed the Butte. Oh, those stairs! Finally, I made it. I entered the church. It was very dark. Only a few candles stung the night. There were still a few people praying. I hid in a corner until they had gone. Then the sacristan closed the heavy door. I heard it creak. He put away a few chairs, extinguished the candles and then left. I was alone, all alone, locked in the Sacred Heart.

"How big! It was dark. I could hear a vague rumor coming from the city, with a few gunshots. Paris was angry. But I wasn't afraid. I was safe. I could sleep peacefully until morning.

"I'd spotted the confessional. I thought I'd be better off hiding in this box. It looked like a Breton bed, like the ones I'd seen at my grandmother's house. I settled in. I took off my orthopedic shoes, which were hurting me. I fell asleep.

"I was awakened by little knocks against the gate that opens onto the outside. You know: the equivalent of the peepholes we have here on the cell doors. It was broad daylight. I peered through the grate. I saw a dozen women waiting to confess. One was already kneeling before me.

"What could I do? If I suddenly emerged from the confessional like a hunted hare, the alarm would be raised and I'd surely be arrested. So...

He sniffs.

- So I confessed them one by one...
- Did you confess them? I can't help but exclaim.
- There was nothing left for me to do...

What an unheard-of situation! This boy, wanted by the police and with a price on his head for having belonged to the Gestapo on Rue Lauriston, confessing to the devotees of Montmartre... <sup>1</sup>

- But you know, sir - and his voice seemed about to break - it's unbelievable what those women told me. I couldn't believe it! Horrors! And yet they weren't wanted, they were certainly well regarded in the neighborhood. Apart from a few whores, they were respected shopkeepers. They had stolen, adulterated their wares, soaked the kids' milk to the point of killing them, denounced their neighbors. I could almost feel their breath against my face. There was even one who had made her husband disappear because she was fed up and wanted to sleep with an insurance agent. She said he'd gone underground. We took her word for it, no questions asked, so she continued to collect the stiff's tickets. I never did that! Why am I being hounded? Why is everyone after me? Tell me, is it possible to do things like this without anyone calling you to account?

He, who had come so close to God knows what horrors, had for the first time had the revelation of Evil, by confessing the sinners of the rue Lepic or the rue des Martyrs! I'd never heard such a story, one that cast a beam of light on the darkest side of human nature...

- So what?" I asked, holding my breath.

- How did it go? I confessed them all, one after the other. I tell you, I've heard them! They sighed, they moaned. They called me "Father". I wanted to laugh. I realized I'd snuck into the confessional of a priest whose parlor day it was, but who'd been prevented from coming because the city was in insurrection. I could hear gunshots in the distance, louder and louder, interspersed with wild cheers...

"What was I saying? Ah, yes<sup>1</sup> I listened to them all the way. They couldn't stop telling me their dirty stories...

- And you gave them absolution?

- Oh no! I didn't know how it was done. And even if I had> I don't think I'd have let them off with a *Pater* and three *Ave*. It wasn't paid for...

- But maybe they thought you'd absolved them?

He remained silent. It was an idea he hadn't thought of.

- After all, shit! I'm not God! These things are beyond me. I had to think of myself first, get myself out of this mess. When I'd had my last confession, there was no one left in the church. It must have been 1 o'clock. Lunchtime. My stomach was in my heels. I put my

orthopedic shoes back on. Puis, seeing that the coast was clear, I slipped out of the confessional. I glanced around to see if anyone was spying on me, and exited the Sacré-Coeur. I took Rue du Chevalier-de-la-Barre and headed down towards the town where the insurrection was growing. I joined those who were firing on the barricades, in the hope that they would give me something to eat... That's when I got bitten.

"Tell me, sir, you who know everything now, does what I've done deserve death?

I'd promised to give him my opinion when he'd finished talking. He had finished speaking, but I didn't know what to say.

I've confined myself to transcribing his bare words, as he told them to me. It would have taken a great writer to give them their full meaning, to describe this hunted boy, confronted for the first time with the inextricable problems of Good and Evil, to delve into the difference between absolution and forgiveness, to know how Justice and Grace might fit together. I would have liked to be sure that there was an intercessor to whom we could address the liturgy's plea: "Pray for us, poor sinners, now and at the hour of our death", for we all have the greatest need of it.

But I prefer to stay on the surface. I'm not Dostoyevsky.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT

(October 15, 1945)

I wake from a restless sleep. Like every morning, I'm surprised to see the walls of my cell and the bars outside my window. What usually wakes me up is the prison rumor. A rumour made up of the sound of keys, nails on shoes, voices approaching, doors being opened and closed with a bang and, dominating it all, the intermittent rumble of the cart rolling on its rails along the corridors to distribute the morning coffee - if you can call it coffee! But today, it's long past distribution time, and the prison is deathly silent. These words take on their full weight here. This silence indicates that death is prowling around the house before it enters, and that someone is about to be taken to the post. On these mornings, the doors remain locked. We're all barricaded in, helpless and holding our breath. Because there are always several death row inmates on the first floor. This is where the administration draws its victims, and we never know in advance which of them will be tortured. Five days ago, it was Joseph Darnand; the day before yesterday,

Jean-Hérolde Pâquis. Who's next?

Five or six death row inmates are currently on the ground floor. Among them, the most eminent is President Laval. I can't believe it's him they've come for. His sentence was handed down barely six days ago.

Who, then? With my heart pounding, I press my ear against the door of my cell. But try as I might, I can't hear anything that

might give me the slightest clue.

Suddenly, I hear a whisper.

- Is that you, Jacques?

- Yes.

- It's Yoyo. Can you hear me?

- Very good.

The peephole makes a kind of funnel, so I can hear every word he says, even though he's speaking in a low voice.

Georges Prade - for it is he - must have taken advantage of the fact that his door was open to slip out of his cell before it was closed<sup>2</sup>. Of all the inmates, he must be the only one able to move around the house this morning.

- Yoyo!... Yoyo!

No answer. He must have gone somewhere else. But my anxiety is so great that I keep my ear to the door. Who is it? Who is it? After all, I don't care. At this point, it doesn't matter. Let them kill us all, while they're at it. Let's not talk about it anymore...

After a while, I hear a whisper again.

- Jacques!

- I'm listening. I'm listening.

- They've come for the President...

My blood runs cold. Already ' They can't wait to get rid of him! I didn't always agree with the former head of government. I've even had stormy disagreements with him. The Germans took him to Sigmaringen. From there, he flew to Spain. Finally, he returned to hand himself over to his judges, in order to justify his policy and save, if possible, all those who followed him. He believed that, if tried, he would not be condemned, and if condemned, that he would not be executed. But events thwarted his calculations. On his arrival at Fresnes, he was left with his papers and his coat, but he was immediately segregated from the other members of the High Court, as if to show that he didn't need to be tried to know his fate. Then he was silenced. Now he's going to die...

When I met him here for the first time, in the corridor leading to the clerk's office, any prejudice I might have had against him melted away in one fell swoop and I felt nothing but pity. He'd lost so much weight since we last met! His shirt collar fluttered

around his scrawny neck. His cheeks were hollowed. His skin had become parchment-like. It seemed to stick to his forehead and temples. But her eyes remained the same. Brown velvet eyes, full of intelligence and kindness, still flashing. Never have I seen such a tragic face - not even Céline's. His expression was at once devastated and indomitable. Dellebecque, the internist, assured me that he had cancer. I wouldn't be surprised...

Over the next few days, I watched him prepare his defense. It was incredible. As he wasn't in France, he hadn't witnessed either the liberation of Paris or the beginnings of the purge. But just forty-eight hours after his arrival in Fresnes, he had observed, analyzed and understood everything. His intelligence has often been praised. Not enough has been said about his sensitivity. At that hour, it was revealed in all its strength and ductility. That's why I felt so strongly for her. Having shed the slightly mocking cynicism that had come with long use of power, he was now just a flayed man whose every nerve was raw, a hunted but proud beast seeking a glimmer of understanding in the eyes of others.

As he was not allowed to communicate with anyone other than his lawyers, and as we were not allowed to approach him, he took the prison guards in charge of watching him as his interlocutors. He said to himself: "After all, they're Frenchmen like me. If I can convince them, I'll convince the others too". What he didn't realize was that he wasn't dealing with men with their own opinions and personal reflexes, but with brains in which the radio broadcasts had brought anti-Lavalist passions to incandescence. I believe that if he had known, he would have abandoned the magazine.

But his passion to convince was stronger than anything else. He was so sure he was right, that he had acted in France's interest! He would choose a guard and tell him in detail how he had acted in this or that circumstance: Montoire, the Obligatory Labor Service, the prisoners, the relief... Often, the guard in question would maintain a bovine gaze, flattered nonetheless that a former President of the Council had taken him on as a witness to his activities. Then Lavai, undeterred, would choose another and repeat his presentation, varying his arguments until he had found those that best penetrated people's heads. And in the end, despite press campaigns, radio broadcasts, instructions from unions and parliamentary groups, he managed to convince most



of his listeners. Alone, deep in his cell and despite his physical decay, he stood up to the pack and was still the strongest! Who could fail to admire him? How right his enemies had been not to let him speak! His defense was ready. He'd honed all his weapons, put his arguments to the test. It would have been an extraordinary spectacle of unsurpassed psychological and intellectual virtuosity. Perhaps he would have been victorious there too? But he wouldn't have. He couldn't have. There were no illusions. He who had spoken as an equal with Brüning, with Stalin, with Mussolini, with Roosevelt, hoped once again to arbitrate the world's differences. He had forgotten only one thing: he was no longer in a position to arbitrate. He was indicted: charged with treason. To make it even more unthinkable, his enemies had drowned out his voice with a torrent of clamor, insults and invective. Then, turning to the court, he uttered this heart-rending cry: "In 1942, you were all at the government's orders! Yes, you obeyed it obediently, all of you who are judging me, you magistrate and you public prosecutor? You can condemn me, you can put me to death. You don't have the right to insult me!" It was the cry of the wounded beast that sees its last hope leave with its last stream of blood...

But I wonder what's going on. It's usually quicker. Is it the extended inventory of his belongings?

I can hear Prade breathing on the other side of the door. He, too, is pressed up against the wooden wall, so as not to be spotted. From the fourth-floor passageway where my cell is located, all he has to do is lean over the railing to get a bird's-eye view of the first floor and Laval's cell, which is almost opposite mine. Thanks to his sort of whispered broadcast, I'll have a detailed description of his departure for death.

- Yoyo, are you there?

- Yes.

- What's going on? It seems like a long time...

- Me too... The lawyers are here. Look, the head brigadier just ran out of the cell... He's coming back with the director... They look distraught...

Silence.

- Here's Dr. Paul... He is followed by a gendarmerie colonel... They enter the cell... They emerge... They hold a conciliation... It's amazing how the noise rises... I can hear just about everything

they're saying to each other... The colonel asks where the telephone is... It's gone... I can't see it anymore... Ah, ah! They say the President has been poisoned...

I must have misunderstood.

- What's wrong? You're breaking up.

- Em - poi - son - né! I can't speak any louder, I'm afraid someone will hear me. It's just me on the corridor. The whole division is deserted. You could hear a fly...

Earlier I thought he didn't talk enough. Now I'm afraid he's too loquacious. It would be a shame if he got caught.

- Shh!" I said. Don't comment. Just tell me briefly what you see.

I step away from the door for a few seconds, grab a small notebook and a pencil and come back to the eyecup.

- Dr. Paul starts to get annoyed... He's waiting for someone or something that isn't coming... He says cyanide... Ah! Here's a nun from the hospital. She's carrying a basin, a big syringe and a bock with a hose...

- Can you see it?

- No. She just entered the cell.

- How is she dressed? Like a nurse?

- No, it's not. Blue dress. White apron. White cornet. Excuse me a moment, I'm going to Bousquet's cell to brief him.

I imagine that at this very minute, hundreds of inmates, pressed up against their cell doors, are desperately trying to hear something. Yet I can't hear a sound. The prison seems empty.

Yoyo must have come back, because I can see a shadow passing in front of the eyecup.

- I hear talk of a stomach pump... What a horror! They want to revive him so they can shoot him. Can't they just let him die in peace?... Here comes the colonel again... He's accompanied by Prosecutor Mornet...

- What does he look like?

- White hair, white goatee, black coat. He is very stooped. He walks up and down with both hands crossed behind his back. He looks like a hyena... He's talking to the manager. But I can't hear what they're saying, because their backs are turned. Mornet makes gestures of denial... I can hear better now. He says: "The law... the law... ■

A long moment of silence. I ask:

- Do you have the time?

- 11:20 a.m. on the prison clock.

- That's a long time... They've been after him for over two hours... God knows what they're doing to him! It's nauseating. Do you think they'll be able to bring him back to life? It would be better for him to die like that, to escape them...

- They do their utmost to revive him... The sister emerges from the cell. She's carrying a basin half-filled with a greenish liquid...

I feel my stomach clench. A cold sweat beads at my temples. Ah no I Not now. It would be too stupid. I want to see this through to the end. I don't dare speak, move or even breathe, for fear of provoking what I'd like to avoid.

The minutes tick by, interminable.

- Can you hear me well?" asks Prade.

- Anything new?

- They managed to make him come to...

- Ah!... never mind.

- Dr. Paul has just come out of the cell saying, "He's saved!"

- What a way to express yourself! So they're going to shoot him?

- I think... the doctor draws up the minutes... He hands it to the director, who reads it and nods... Mornet takes it from him... He reads it back and says: "That's perfect. Now let's get a move on. We've lost a lot of time..."

- What time is it?

- Five to twelve... The sister has just left the cell. We help the President get dressed. He must be very weak.

A prolonged silence.

- Ah! Voilà... Voilà... The President emerges from his cell. His two lawyers support him with one arm each.

- Who?

- Naud and Baraduc. There's a third, younger one...

- It's Jaffré.

- The President's strides are slow, but he's very upright. He wears a suit and a blue-white-red choker... No shoes. He's wearing felt slippers. I wonder why. He heads for the exit... He stops for a moment, as if he can't take it anymore. Jaffré brings him a glass of water... He leaves again... They're going to shoot a

living corpse... I'm sorry, I can't take it anymore. I've got to get back to my cell. See you soon...

The eyecup becomes transparent again. Yoyo is gone. I leave the door and rush to the window to see if I can see anything. It's stuck. As I shake it like a madman, risking breaking the glass, I hear a van starting up. When the window finally opens, it's gone. I press my forehead against the bars. It's gone.

From my cell, however, my gaze takes in the walkway. I see fifteen or so soldiers staggering forward in single file. They're wearing khaki uniforms and English helmets. They're singing and winding their rifles. My word! They're drunk! It's the firing squad. They walk along the parapet walk and disappear, hidden by the corner of the building I'm occupying. I can't see the soldiers anymore. But I can easily imagine what they're doing...

Standing motionless, muscles tense, head tucked into shoulders, I close my eyes and wait like a thunderbolt for the dry detonation that tells me it's all over.

I wait a long time. But I hear nothing. The silence is total.

And suddenly, at 12:23, a dull rumor, intermingled with shouts and imprecations, rises from 3<sup>e</sup> division. It swells, rises, grows like a storm, eventually filling the entire prison. A moment ago, the prison seemed empty. Now it's bursting at the seams. In every cell, inmates are kicking, punching and stamping on doors, shaking windows and shouting wildly:

- Bandits! Bastards! Assassins '

It looks like a tornado is passing over the house. The Administration doesn't dare intervene. They're afraid. What could they do against this unleashing of fury? If the guards were to open the cell doors, they'd be ripped apart, for the crowd of inmates has literally lost its mind. The whole prison is foaming. I don't know what I'm doing. It's not even rage anymore. It's a kind of insanity, all the more frenzied for being contained within the walls.

This deafening din goes on for over half an hour. Then it gradually subsides, like a receding wave. Finally, it falls silent. Everything returns to normal. Silence reigns once more.

I collapse on my bench, exhausted...

All day long, the doors remain closed. There's no walking around. The next day I learn a few more details. A common law prisoner who works in a building bordering the walkway told me

about the execution. The President was invited to stand by the side of the road, not far from the cell van that was to carry away his corpse. Suddenly gripped by fear, President Bouchardon and prosecutor Mornet sought to hide behind the van, so as not to see what was about to happen. Laval saw them and said:

- Come, come, gentlemen, a little courage! See your sinister task through to the end!

Questioned by me about the inebriated state of the firing squad soldiers, a brigadier, deeply revolted by the whole scene, confirmed the matter.

- The men had been there since 6 o'clock in the morning," he tells me. But they must have waited several hours, since the execution didn't take place until after midday. Shooting a man is never pleasant. The more the morning wore on, the more nervous they became. Every hour they were served a quart of rum. Since they hadn't expected the wait to be so long, they hadn't brought any snacks with them and hadn't eaten anything since waking up. These gulps of alcohol falling on empty stomachs had made them completely schlass.

When Dr. Paul was called to the President's bedside, he had been told that he had just poisoned himself with an ampoule of cyanide hidden in a seam of his pelisse. He then performed a test commonly used, it seems, at the forensic institute, to determine whether or not a person is dead: he slashed the soles of his feet with a razor blade. If the blood stops flowing, there's no hope. The blood had flowed, from which Dr. Paul concluded that resuscitation was possible.

When Laval had regained consciousness and dressed to leave his cell, he had wanted to put on his shoes, but had been unable to bear them because of the cuts made by the coroner. He'd had to settle for felt slippers. But when he stood up, the blood flowed harder and soaked the soles of his slippers. As the former President of the Council made his way to the exit, each of his footsteps had left a bloody imprint on the corridor's tiled floor - an imprint that an inmate had had to wipe away behind him with a wet mop.

Finally, I learn that, during the stomach washings, Sister Philippe de Néri, the nun in charge of performing the operation, couldn't help exclaiming:

- If God is watching us right now, he must not be proud of us!

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### BACK TO FIRST FLOOR

(June - August 1947)

A thunderous roar fills the Salle des Congrès at the Palais de Versailles. It's a drum roll. An usher announces in a sonorous voice:

- Gentlemen, the Court!

The entire audience rises. Coming from the Salle des Délibérations, I see M. Louis Noguères, President, Messrs Maurice Guérin and Kriegel-Valrimont, Vice-Presidents, the twenty-four jurors, M. Frette-Damicourt, Attorney General, magistrates, clerks and bailiffs. They march between two rows of Republican Guards, who present them with their weapons and return to their seats. The drums fall silent.

From the rostrum, President Noguères read the final judgment:

*In view of the decision rendered on January 23, 1947 by the Indictment Division of the High Court of Justice,*

*Having regard to the indictment drawn up by the Public Prosecutor against the above-mentioned on May 24, 1947,*

*Having regard to the original summons dated May 24, 1947,*

*The High Court, constituted in accordance with the provisions of the law of December 27, 1945, having heard the Attorney General in his closing arguments, the accused Benoist-Méchin, and Mr.<sup>e</sup> Aujol and Mr. Marcel Héraud, his counsel, in their observations, the accused having spoken last,*



*Having deliberated in accordance with the law and in Council Chamber,*

*Whereas Benoist-Méchin is charged with the crime of intelligence with the enemy under the terms of articles 75 et seq. of the penal code and the crime of national indignity under the terms of articles 1<sup>er</sup> , 2, 21 and 23 of the order of December 26, 1944,*

*Considering...*

*Considering...*

*Considering...*

It goes on like that for eight pages

*For these reasons,*

*Sentenced Benoist-Méchin to death, sentenced him to national degradation for life, and ordered him to pay all costs,*

*Orders that the present judgment shall be executed at the request of*

*Mr. Attorney General,*

*Done and delivered at the Palais de Versailles, Salle des Congrès, on June 6, 1947, at 6:30 pm.*

According to a witness, I didn't flinch during the reading of the judgement . How could it be otherwise, since I'm indifferent to being condemned to death? But I feel a great wave of commiseration rising up inside me.

At the end of the proceedings, the Chairman asked me "if I had anything to add in my defense". I replied in the negative, knowing that my case had already been decided and that no words could bridge the chasm that separates me from my accusers. They wanted to cut me off from the world; but I, by my own will, have already cut myself off from them.

But I'm not done yet with the public who have followed my trial hearings for nearly eight days. I can't let them believe that I accept the terms of the judgment. I turn to the room and cry out in protest:

- It's all a pack of lies I It's as if there'd never been a trial...

I didn't need to think to find these words. They sprang spontaneously from my chest. As I said them, I held out my arms to

the audience in a gesture of farewell. And the audience responded by extending theirs. In the stands, women weep, men wave, others applaud. Shouts come from all sides. In the box reserved for the President of the National Assembly, a beautiful young woman I don't know stands up and indignantly utters words whose meaning escapes me as they are covered by the general hubbub (only much later do I learn that her name is Anne de La Houssaye). The tumult increases. Jurors heading for the exit turn pale. President Noguères calls out in a dramatic voice: "Guards! Clear the room!" I don't see the end of the scene, as a lieutenant from the gendarmerie escorts me, flanked by two gendarmes, to the small salon reserved for me.

As I walk away from the Congress hall, a verse I'd forgotten jumps to mind:

*O you whose boat is small, return to your shores...*

It's the one with which Dante wanted to say goodbye to the detractors of *The Divine Comedy*. I don't know of *one* that reflects a more haughty disdain. It's more or less how I feel at this moment, when, turning my back on my judges whom I'll never see again, and leaving behind me a world that no longer means anything to me, I embark on a voyage of no return across a sea without shores. As if a heavy burden had fallen from my shoulders, everything suddenly seems lighter and brighter.

However, my wait was prolonged in the living room, where I was locked in with the lieutenant of the gendarmerie and one of his men. Through the door I hear clamors, short orders and the sound of hurried footsteps. Suddenly, one of the door wings swings open to let in my lawyer, the bâtonnier Marcel Héraud. Although his face remains impassive, I sense that he is more moved than he lets on. I wouldn't dare admit to him that I hadn't heard his or<sup>e</sup> Aujol's closing arguments. Nor, for that matter, did I hear Mr Frette-Damicourt's indictment, for when I had finished answering the magistrates' questions, I felt myself enveloped by a cloud so deep that it rendered me almost insensitive to what was going on around me.

- I've just approached President Noguères," says the bâtonnier. I asked him to allow your mother to come and kiss you one last time. He refused.

- Ah? Well.

What else can we expect?

- Mr<sup>e</sup> Aujol stayed by her side to comfort her, despite her impressive courage.

- I'm not surprised either.

I suddenly remember a scene that took place a month ago, in the visiting room at Fresnes. I was already certain of being sentenced to death. But I saw my mother so smiling and so happy that I said to myself: "She doesn't realize! I've got to warn her. Otherwise, when the sentence comes down, it'll be too hard a blow. I tried to enlighten her as gently as possible: "You know," I told her, "we mustn't delude ourselves. I'll certainly get a very heavy sentence. - What do you call a very heavy sentence?" she asked. I wanted to say "death", but the word didn't pass my lips. I was afraid of giving her the blow I wanted to avoid. "If all goes very, very well, I'll probably be sentenced... to hard labor for life. Her gaze hadn't wavered. - How?" she asked me again, "with the terrible sentences that all these young people are taking who are far from having assumed the same responsibilities as you, would you want to take less?" I breathed a sigh of relief. She'd understood everything.

- The crowd," continued the bâtonnier, "wanted to gather in the gallery to greet you when you used it to go to the exit. Your mother was in the front row. Someone brought her a chair, lest the emotion... You see... Her old age... She refused, saying, "If my son walks past me right now, I want him to see me standing!"

Dear Mom! It's really her...

- But President Noguères had the gallery evacuated. The demonstration earlier today made him very angry. So you won't be seeing it. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to leave too, as we're going to close the palace. I'll come and see you tomorrow. Would you like me to give her a message?

- To whom?

- To your mother.

- Yes. Tell her I love her and don't let her worry. Whatever happens, I'll try to be to the end as she would want me to be.

Marcel Héraud retires. I hear voices again. Suddenly, an indescribable uproar erupts. This time, it's outside. I walk to the window and lean over the sill to see what's going on. My living room overlooks Rue des Réservoirs, which runs along the left wing of the palace to Place d'Armes. A crowd of at least three thousand people has massed in front of the entrance gate. They are shouting,

screaming and shaking the bars of the gate as if they wanted to tear them off. I can hear them shouting in cadence: "Jurors, murderers! Jurors, murderers!" The security guards try to contain her, as a group of demonstrators want to set fire to the buses that will take the members of the High Court back to Paris. They close the central gate. Inside the gates, an infantry unit deploys and brings its machine guns into position. I hope they don't shoot! I lean forward as far as I can, hoping to attract the attention of a passer-by. I'd like him to tell the crowd to disperse to avoid bloodshed. Just then, the lieutenant of the gendarmerie comes towards me.

- I regret to remind you that it is forbidden to lean out of the window," he says. Please stand at the back of the room.

I obey. I think he's right. If anything, it's better if the crowd doesn't see me. It might increase their excitement.

A commander, whom I assume to be the head of security, enters the lounge and exchanges a few words in a low voice with the lieutenant. He turns to me.

- Since you've been sentenced, I'll have to put you in handcuffs," he says, a little reluctantly. Please don't be angry. I'm bound by the rules.

He gestures to the gendarme guarding the door. He steps forward, chain in hand. Just as he's about to proceed, the lieutenant stops him.

- No!" he said. Not that way. To handcuff the gentleman, put on your white gloves.

As the gendarme puts on his gloves, I stare at the lieutenant. His gaze is frank and clear. His upper lip trembles. He says nothing. Nor am I. But we understand each other. France, France all the same...

I hold both hands out in front of me. It's my first time. The gendarme handcuffs me as if I'm being decorated.

- Now, if you'll follow me," says the lieutenant.

He leads me out of the salon and shows me to a seat in the gallery where the shadows are beginning to gather.

- I've been instructed to keep you here until you can leave.

- How long will it take?

- I wouldn't know. At least not until the demonstrators have withdrawn.

I reach out and hear a muffled roar through the walls. It's the crowd still pounding against the outer gates. I dread to hear a shot crackle.

Passes by a journalist who followed my trial for a provincial paper. What do you know! What's she doing here? No doubt she lingered in

the palace. Now she's locked in with me. It's quite funny. It's the first time I've seen her up close. I can see why she's so full of hate, because nature hasn't done her any favors. She gives me a frightened look, as if she's just met Dr. Jekyll. I can hear her muttering:

- This is unacceptable! It's been going on for nearly an hour and the police are doing nothing to clear the square! What the hell are we waiting for to shoot the scum?

She must feel like she's living through "an historic minute": besieged by the crowd in the Palace of Versailles - which doesn't happen to everyone - she must have thought she was the Queen during the day of August 10th, and that this is how the Capet woman must have spoken... Fortunately, she hurried away. I hope she doesn't come back...

Half an hour passes. At last the tumult subsides. We can return to Fresnes.

\*

When the cell car pulls up in front of the prison, I realize that the guard service has been reinforced. A section of C.R.S. patrols the courtyard. Mr. Hénard, the head warden, is waiting for me on the stoop to take me to the registry office. Everything is different from when I first arrived. What used to be a mere administrative formality has taken on, I don't know why, an almost solemn character. Why is this? The fact that I'm going to die soon? Looks, gestures and words seem unreal to me, as if things are coming to me from a greater distance. How strange to look at life when you're already virtually excluded from it!

When I reach the registry office, the head supervisor removes my handcuffs.

- Take off your clothes," he said laconically. Yes, shirt, underpants, socks too...

While I remain absolutely naked, the checkroom attendant takes an inventory of my clothes, enters them in a register and hangs them on a coat rack. I'm amazed at the care he takes, because usually...

- You see," he says, "everything's neat and tidy. So you won't have to wait until the morning when we come to pick you up.

It's true, it's true. I'd forgotten all about it.

- Sign here," he says, handing me the register.

I sign at the bottom of the page, in red ink. My last signature. I feel

as if I'm ratifying my death warrant in my own blood.

- Now go into the next room," the head supervisor instructs me.

I'm still naked. I hesitate for a moment, as crossing the threshold seems to me an irrevocable act that will consummate my break with everything. At the same time, I feel the beneficial sensation of performing a rite of purification. I take the plunge. Here I am, in another world that can only be accessed by leaving behind all the trappings of the past. I enter a small, dimly-lit room containing only a bench. On the bench are a suit of bure, a pair of underpants, a shirt, three handkerchiefs and a pair of clogs. The pants are made of two separate pieces, buttoned at the side. Next to the pants, I can see a bundle of chains connecting two large iron bracelets.

When I've finished putting on my death-row uniform, an overseer I didn't see come in kneels down in front of me. This gesture is so surprising, so unusual, that I wonder what it means. Has this man come to implore my blessing? No. He's come to fasten my chains. He screws the two iron bracelets around my ankles with a square-ended wrench. I think I discern a kind of symmetry between the man's genuflection and the gesture of the gendarme putting on his white gloves to handcuff me.

- Now I'll take you to your cell," says the head guard. Walk in front of me.

I walk slowly ahead of him, as I'm not yet used to wearing chains. I'm surprised by the clanking sound they make as they drag across the pavement. We walk down the central aisle. It's empty. It must be very late, as all the lights are out. When we reach the first floor of the<sup>re</sup> division, we turn left. The head guard opens the gate to death row. He leads me to a door on which I can see the number 71. He opens it in turn. I enter my cell. The door closes. But before leaving, he hands me my pipe and tobacco pouch through the peephole.

- Take it," he said. This is yours.

These are the only two objects I own. Apart from that, nothing else is mine. Not even a pocket handkerchief. Not owning anything anymore, what a relief!

I don't need to look round my cell to see what it's like. A bench, a plank serving as a table, a stool attached to the wall by a chain. On the table I see a few sheets of white paper, some envelopes, a quill pen and an inkwell. Who brought this? Not the administration, that's for sure. Someone whose face I can't make out whispers a few words to me through the peephole.

- It's from Admiral de Laborde \*... In case you want to write to your mother.

I head for the peephole. The shadow has disappeared

Dear Count Jean! I had forgotten that the former commander-in-chief of our high seas forces was also in chains, occupying a cell just a stone's throw from mine. This experienced sailor will help me in my navigation...

And now what? Sleep, despite the light bulb on the ceiling

■ Admiral Jean de Laborde (1878-1977). Commander-in-Chief of the French High Seas Fleet. Responsible for scuttling the Toulon fleet in November 1942. Sentenced to death in 1947. Pardoned by President Auriol.

that stays on twenty-four hours a day. But will I be able to with my chains on? I take off my habit and lie down on my bench. It's going better than I thought. A few minutes later, I fall asleep.

When I wake up the next morning, the sun is already up. A blue sky stretches across my window. I'm overjoyed ' The summer of 1947 is going to be particularly beautiful. Fortune favors me, for I've always dreaded being condemned in winter. I fear the cold. It could have made me tremble. I don't need to write the rest. I no longer run that risk. One less thing to worry about...

I write a note to my mother, taking my time, to tell her that I'm fine, that my spirits are high, that the best of my strength will come from her courage. And then I think.

My situation is simple: either I'll be shot and all will be over; or I'll be pardoned by the President of the Republic and my sentence commuted to hard labor for life. But apart from the fact that this second solution has only a slim chance of winning, I can only contemplate it with horror. Spending the rest of my life within prison walls, digging clogs with a router or filling tubes with Seccotine, I know I'll never have the strength to endure it. Being sentenced to death for political reasons has never dishonored anyone. What is dishonorable is clinging to life, and accepting to do, year after year, work that degrades one to the rank of the beast. I know that one day I'll hang myself from the bars of my cell. I might as well leave this work to others. Looking at it coldly, dying by firing squad has many advantages. It spares you the decrepitude of age and physical decline, and is infinitely better than agonizing for months on end in a hospital bed. Twelve men staring you in the face and aiming for your heart - it's neat, it's clean and it's fast. Maybe we don't even have time to hear the end of the salvo...

The trick is to be ready for it. To do this, you mustn't feed yourself illusions, or live day after day in the expectation of grace. To do so is to deceive yourself and allow death to fall upon you unexpectedly. I've kept in my ear the cry of a slaughtered beast that a prisoner uttered when he saw the Public Prosecutor enter his cell, one morning when he wasn't expecting him.

Yes, I must be prepared. Use every moment to break my moorings. Overcome self-preservation, memory and hope. Let there be nothing left to tie me to life, nothing they can take away. Nothing left but an empty shell. Then their bullets will pierce me but not reach me.

How much time do I have left? Six weeks? Two months, before the black silhouettes of the law's enforcers appear in my doorway?

But I won't be able to do this until I've got rid of the two questions that torment me. What will become of my mother when I'm gone? She's seventy-eight. With me gone, she'll have nothing to live for. She'll let herself wither away. Given her advanced age, she'll have no trouble doing that. A few difficult weeks to get through, and then it's all over. Obviously, I would have preferred a different ending for her. I would have liked to be there to close her eyes. But it wasn't up to me. Others will bear the responsibility.

The second question is of a different order. When my trial began, I didn't want to resort to what lawyers complacently call "a defense system". It would have seemed unworthy. I didn't want to plead my case or defend myself. But since my actions were carried out as a member of the government, I must account for them. This seems normal to me. So I wanted to explain them, convinced that if I succeeded, the French would understand the scruples and sense of responsibility with which they were defended, and would stop tearing each other apart. It was to presume too much on my strength. I didn't succeed. It leaves me with a bitter taste of dissatisfaction.

I would have liked my trial to take place in the full light of day, with nothing left in the shadows. In that respect, I have to admit that I was defeated. I don't claim that the procedure was not respected. It was. The scales were right. But, at the last moment, everything was weighed with rigged weights. Between my accusers and me, words had neither the same meaning nor the same value. A gulf separated us. I could see it widening as I spoke. It was hopeless. By the time it was all over, I realized we'd have to start all over again. It couldn't be done.

Was it all my fault? I don't think so. The first hearing went pretty



well. But in the second, as soon as we got to the heart of the matter, the bad faith and biases began to reawaken. I was constantly hampered in my presentations by a host of tendentious or incoherent questions which did not correspond to reality or the sequence of facts, and which confused what I was trying to make clear. Some of these questions were so absurd that I had to control my astonishment before answering them. In the end, I had to face the facts. If most of my judges couldn't hear me, it was because they didn't *want to* hear me. I had naively believed that my accusers wanted to know what had happened, to learn what they didn't know. But I was wrong. They weren't there to understand, but to condemn. The game was up. Hence my disgust and final exclamation.

But if I can't do anything to alleviate my mother's fate, I can make a last-ditch effort to communicate to others what I failed to convey to my accusers. Yes. I'm going to do it. In the form of a letter to my lawyer Jean-Louis Aujol. I'll send it to him via Jacqueline Marson, Marcel Héraud's collaborator, who has shown me so much friendship and understanding over the last few weeks.

I take up my pen and write the following text on the last sheets of paper given to me by Admiral de Laborde:

*Fresnes, June 21, 1947'.  
Cell 71.*

*My dear Master and Friend,*

*So here I am, back on the main floor of Fresnes, on the death row. How many times in the past have I leaned over the fourth-floor balustrade and looked down to make out the silhouette of one or other of my comrades condemned to death? How many times did my ear not catch the jingling of the chains that bound their ankles? I used to wonder if I'd ever join them. But now I have. I've put on a suit of bure; and when I hear the sound of chains, they're mine.*

1. I've dated this letter June 21, because that's the day of the summer solstice, the supreme feast of *Sol invictus*. In reality, it was written on June 8 and 9. I kept it a few days of it with me, so I could reread it and make sure that none of the words betrayed or exceeded my thoughts. It is reproduced at the end of the stenographic account of my trial, published by Albin Michel in June 1948.

*The days go by quickly and without a care in the world about tomorrow. But in the evening, when night falls, I feel the weight of prison weighing down on me. More than ever, it reminds me of a large, immobile ship*

*dragging on its anchors. I'm at the bottom of the hold and, above my head, floor by floor, I can hear the lives of all those who have been mowed down by the same adventure and brought together behind the same windows. Through the open windows - for it's very hot - I listen until late into the night to a multitude of voices calling out to each other and talking to each other. They form a confused rumor in which I distinguish, from far and wide, the name of someone dear to me, of a town I once knew. And because I can't see the faces of those who speak, I'm all the more sensitive to the entanglement of these destinies, with which I feel a sense of solidarity.*

*All these men, young and old, have been incarcerated for participating in or believing in a certain policy. And yet, if asked what it really was, they would often be at a loss to say. The confusion in their minds is matched only by the mess in which they were arrested. What did the government they are accused of following do, what did it want? Listening to them question each other in the dark, from cell to cell, I realize that at this hour, the same anxious dialogue is going on in every prison in France. What can I do to answer their questions and dispel their uncertainty? In formulating this wish, I'm not only thinking of those who are suffering for having adhered to this policy. I'm also thinking of those who stood up against it, who suffered because of it - and who know even less about what it was.*

*I don't claim to be unaware of its external manifestations. I'm no stranger to mistakes and weaknesses. But what do we really know about its inner workings, its hopes and aspirations? The judges we've been given have obliged us to defend ourselves, above all, from having been traitors. As a result, we had to devote the best of our energy to proclaiming that we were not. However vigorous our protest, it is not enough to define a policy. By dint of reducing the debate to the sole question of whether or not we had betrayed our country, things, far from becoming clearer, became even murkier. Is it any wonder, then, that most French people are confused? How would they know what we were, or rather, what we sought to be?*

*This is what, above all, I wanted to make clear during my*

*trial - and I wanted to make it clear to both sides. I said in my opening statement that I remain one of the few living witnesses to one of the most misunderstood periods in our history. The longer my trial goes on, the more I realize that this is true. That's why I've insisted on explaining myself right up to the end; that's why I've endeavored to preserve right up to the end - and it wasn't always easy, as you well know, having lived through those harrowing hearings with me - all the composure and serenity of which I was capable, to shed light on the debate and dispel, if possible, the wrong legends.*

*Have I succeeded? I'm afraid not, and that's the only thing that's bothering me today. Have I made my motives clear? And even if I have, will my voice be heard in court?*

*Because, you see, our adherence to the policy of "collaboration" was not only dictated, as has sometimes been said, by a concern to "save the furniture" or "choose the lesser evil..."*

I put down the pen for a moment. "Save the furniture! What an awful expression! Was it to "save the furniture" that I embarked on this battle? That I went through so many cold sweats and sleepless nights, wondering if what I was doing was the right thing to do? Was it to "save the furniture" that I strove to accelerate the release of our prisoners, defend the integrity of our territory, encourage our recovery, ensure the future of our youth? Not to mention the fate of our hard-working people and those who remained loyal to us across the seas?

But let's stay calm. That's all in the past. From all this too, I imperceptibly distance myself I take up my pen again and continue my letter:

*To view our efforts in this exclusively opportunistic light is to reduce them to their most mediocre and humiliating level, and to ignore the great and lofty aspects they may have had. It's to disconnect this policy from its essential dimension, and deprive it of its share of nobility, which alone can explain - and justify - the hopes and sacrifices it has aroused.*

*I'm not afraid to say that some of them were admirable: the chains I wear give me the right to do so.*

*Certainly, our minds and hearts were gripped by the*

*necessities of the moment. Certainly, we were driven by a fierce determination to safeguard everything that could be safeguarded of our national heritage. It was, as I put it, "to reclaim in spirit all that had been snatched from us by arms". To achieve this, our decisions were inspired by the strictest realism, and our actions were modelled on the ebb and flow of the battlefield. I would be wary of underestimating the value of this task, which is infinitely more arduous than is commonly thought.*

*But this was not the only aspect, nor even the essential one. Beyond the formal limits assigned to us by the defense of French interests and the need to adapt our initiatives to the concerns of the day, we were striving to act from a broader perspective, to do more in space and time. Beyond immediate tasks and day-to-day negotiations, our eyes, scanning the future, sought to discern what the aftermath of this war would be. Born in the thunder of cannon fire, we hoped that our work would survive the restoration of peace. We endeavored to outline a French policy that would escape the vagaries of strategy. Our policy had two parts: the temporary and the permanent. The temporary is dead. The permanent remains. That's what we need to highlight.*

*Called upon to explain past actions and bound by the precise questions of an interrogation... (which sought less to shed light on my efforts than to highlight my failures)*

*... I'm afraid I wasn't able to sufficiently highlight what was forward-looking about this policy, by which I mean the part of it that is still valid today, having escaped the circumstances of the past.*

*The hearings at my trial dwelt at length on secondary documents, while others, which are still of interest today, were only touched upon. For example, my statement to the foreign press on September 21, 1941, in which - before anyone else, I would like to emphasize - I raised the spectre of a conflict between the USSR and the Anglo-Americans in the event of the collapse of the Reich's armies, was barely mentioned. Needless to say, such a prospect, with the unprecedented devastation it would inevitably entail... (and we didn't yet know about nuclear weapons)... and the risk it entailed of once again turning our territory into a battlefield, figured prominently among our concerns at the time?*

*This eventuality, which seemed a bold hypothesis in 1941, has now become the theme of every speech; it weighs heavily on every mind. Will we be criticized for having looked so far ahead and tried to*

*spare our country this additional ordeal? Was it a crime to fear that we would end up in a situation where France, having lost the weight and authority necessary to weigh in the balance, would find herself crushed between two antagonistic "blocs" whose differences she would no longer be able to arbitrate, nor disarm their hostility? Were we wrong to consider that our policy of European federation was better than a world torn between two irreconcilable ideologies?*

*During my trial, I explained our conception of Europe. They pretended to believe that this was a new position, different from the one I had taken when I was in government...*

*And even before that! Back in 1939, did I not publish a History of the Ukraine that left no doubt as to the nature of my opinions? Did I not endlessly repeat Proudhon's phrase, which I considered prophetic: "Either Europe will move towards a vast federal organization, or it will regress for a thousand years"?*

*This view has never changed, and if my judges had been more perceptive - or less preoccupied with upholding their own theses - they would have seen that this was the crux of the drama, as attested by my notes of July 14, 1941 to the Reich Government....*

*I mean those that led Ribbentrop to suspend negotiations and declare a "state of tension" between France and the Reich.*

*It was undoubtedly a mistake to believe that one could make one's point of view prevail in a world at war, when one was disarmed. Are we to conclude that this policy was too ambitious for France? I don't think so. Subsequent events have shown that history would have taken a different turn had Germany understood in time that France was proposing a constructive solution to which it would be necessary to return, albeit in a different form, and perhaps through a new world conflict.*

*I could multiply examples of this kind; talk about our efforts to organize the world of work and agriculture; evoke our projects relating to national equipment, which would have transformed the face of the country. Others will explain, as these issues are more their domain than mine.*

*But I'm putting down the pen. It's getting late and I don't want to make this letter too long. In a few hours, dawn will break and I may hear the footsteps of those who, from time to time, come to fetch one of those chained here to take them to the post. One morning, no doubt, it will be my turn. That day will find me faithful to the principles for which I have always*

*fought. I will die for having thought that my duty was to defend my country on the spot, in its hour of greatest distress, and to fight with all my strength to help it find the paths to renewal. I will die for having wanted to contribute to creating a state of affairs that avoids the periodic return of these bloody confrontations in which all the nations of the continent sacrifice the best of their elites and the flower of their youth. I shall die with my gaze fixed on the horizon that has always been mine: a renewed France in a Europe finally united and free of all interference from outside itself.*

*For we were no less in love with freedom than anyone else. But we wanted to regain it in ways that would not bring such destruction and hatred. Is there a more exalting cause to die for?*

*I am assured, however, that I will not be executed. I accept the omen. But I can't distinguish between truth and concern. So, not wanting to let myself be taken by surprise by the irrevocable, I am sending you this letter, which faithfully reflects my thoughts.*

*Let's hope I can still make it heard myself. Otherwise, you'll be saying for me what I can no longer say.*

I'm relieved. I can finally work on detaching myself from myself. I've already come a long way. But I've still got a long way to go, before the final stripping.

\*

Alas! Why does some stupid incident have to keep getting in my way?

The common law prisoner who distributes our soup - and whom I strongly suspect of spying on us on behalf of F Administration - takes the liberty of throwing my bowl at me twice a day like a dog, splattering the floor of my cell with a wide, greasy trail. This I will not tolerate. I ask to speak to the brigadier on duty and tell him, in a peremptory tone, that I won't touch my soup until it's presented to me properly. It's unappetizing enough as it is. The brigadier withdraws, muttering threats.

After a quarter of an hour, the deputy head supervisor arrives, the one we call Babar. He's a portly man. A mass of flesh and bone who enjoys terrorizing the inmates. He's as red as a turkey.

- What's the matter? You want to go on a hunger strike? he says in

a hoarse voice. You'll see what I'm made of!

- There's no question of that," I reply calmly. I'll eat my soup when it's presented to me properly.

- Correctly, correctly!" he repeats, rolling his resinous eyes. I'll show you! If you don't eat it right away, I'll send you to the hole! (For those who don't know, "mitard" is an unspeakable dungeon, a prison within a prison).

In the past, this would have appalled me. Now I couldn't care less. The idea of going to solitary seems so baroque that I burst out laughing. Babar's face is becoming increasingly flushed. He's going to die. If he could, he'd fall on me.

- Me, in solitary?" I said. Haven't you realized yet that you can't do *anything* to me? Your solitary confinement no longer impresses me. What punishment do you want to inflict on me, now that I'm condemned to death?

For a moment, he was speechless.

- You won't be here much longer anyway," he says vengefully.

- I know you do. But even *that* no longer depends on you. I'm free, you understand, free, absolutely free. Nothing touches me anymore. Because I've been hit with the most severe punishment, your solitary confinement seems like a bad joke to me. Go shout somewhere else. I've heard enough.

Drops of sweat bead at his temples. He wonders what's happened to him. This fat, pudgy torturer in a navy blue jacket, whom no inmate has ever stood up to. Suddenly, he realizes that something is broken: the authority he has accumulated over thirty years of penitentiary servility. He shakes like a leaf and grumbles away:

- It's okay, it's okay... it won't bring you luck!

No chance? Suddenly, I realize something I hadn't realized before: I've never been more totally unarmed and, at the same time, more totally invulnerable. What a discovery!

Not only has Babar given up trying to bring the weight of his wrath down on me, but the next day I discover that the common law man who distributes the soup has been replaced by a young militiaman from the Franc-Garde. He hands me my bowl not only correctly, but sympathetically. Sympathy expressed not in words, but in a certain glint in his eye. Two days later, he dared to speak to me.

- I'd like to ask you something," he said, blushing.

- What is it?

- I have an autograph book that I keep as a souvenir. Wouldn't you like to write something in it? I'd love to.

- Of course you can. Bring it to my soup tonight.

- Thank you so much! I didn't dare...

That same evening, he brings me the notebook in question. Others than me have already written a few words in it: Laval, Bergery, Bassompierre\*, Brasillach, and a host of names I don't know. I take advantage of a moment of good humor to write this *Epitaph for a bad boy*:

*Born in Paris, died in Montrouge<sup>1</sup>  
He slipped in the red grass  
A beautiful morning without saying goodbye  
But for a boy my age, it wasn't much of a trip. Next  
time he'll do better.*

*Born in Paris, died in Montrouge, Look at him:  
nothing moves, A veil has fallen over his eyes. To  
teach him to be wise And to respect customs He  
was shot, for God's sake!*

It's really a "piece de circonstance". It's not famous. After all, I've never written verse. A simple ritornello, the Franc-Garde is delighted. That's all there is to it.

He's not the only one who visits me. A supervisor, who is not on duty on death row but whom I knew once, when I was on the fourth floor of the 1<sup>re</sup> division, comes to see me from time to time. He too "wishes me well" but doesn't know how to express it. He remains motionless in front of me, in an embarrassed attitude, glances out of the window behind whose bars the sun shines brightly, and lets out a long sigh. Suddenly, he lets out all that's in his heart with this admirable exclamation:

- It's a shame to be shot down in a year when the wine is so good !

O Virgil! I think only in France can you hear a word like that. But I don't want to be overcome by emotion. It pulls me back and ties me to life. That's why I prefer the quiet, reserved presence of the man I call "my evening visitor". It's a cat, an unknown tomcat. As night falls, he slips between the bars of my window and enters my cell. Purring, he snuggles up to my feet, stares at me and rubs his muzzle



against my chains. What does he want with me? Why has he adopted me? For the past few days, he's been coming back every evening at dusk. He doesn't come to console me, since he's unaware of my condition. His affection for me is on another level, and what I discover in the depths of his eyes is precious in another way. He encourages me to persevere on the path I've embarked upon. Rubbing against my chains, he tells me: ■ Don't grieve over anything! All this is insignificant. Follow my example: become free and unattainable like me". At least, that's what I think I understand.

And then there are the priests. The admirable Father Mouren, the warm-hearted Abbé Popot, who says mass every morning in a cell close to mine. Never, perhaps, has the Holy Office celebrated in the presence of a dozen condemned men all doomed to death taken on such a degree of stripped-down fervor. In this small, bare cell, devoid of all ornamentation, it is truly the spirit of Emmaus that descends upon the rough-hewn plank on which the officiant bows. But as soon as the prayers are over, topicality takes over again, as the condemned take advantage of their brief time together to exchange predictions on the winners of the next stages of the Tour de France. This preoccupation astonishes me in men who have a good chance of reaching the finish line before the riders! It's true that Abbé Popot piously nurtures in them the hope of winning what he calls "the yellow jersey of a presidential grace".

For me, who has no cycling skills whatsoever, I prefer to talk to Father d'Oncieux of the Society of Jesus, who has been given a special permit to communicate with me. He is both a great soul and a luminous spirit. He asks me what I need, what he can give me.

- My father, my father," I said, smiling, "is it really up to you to deprive me of the benefits of evangelical poverty?

It's only now, with nothing left but my pipe and tobacco pouch, that I know how delectable it is. I wish I'd practiced it sooner. I had to come here to learn that every step towards stripping is a step towards fullness. What will it be like when the stripping is complete and I've given up everything? Above all, don't bring me anything! I have withdrawn from the century, because the century is clutter.

Father d'Oncieux nods in agreement, but a shadow passes over his face when I tell him that I don't wish to confess, that I'll attend mass before going to the ordeal, but that it will be like a diver who takes a deep breath and fills his lungs before jumping into the abyss.

- So you don't believe in God?" he asks me with a touch of

concern.

- Of course I do! And with all my might...
- So why do you reject the Church's help?
- I don't believe in the God celebrated on altars.
- Do you think about death?

- As little as possible. I don't have a problem with it. Rather, it's life itself that seems an enigma. Why have I lived? What was the point? I thought I saw a road opening up before me. I thought my life had a meaning, a purpose. I believed I was fulfilling the task for which I had been created. The clues were so numerous, so powerful, so clear! And then, in one fell swoop, it was all cut off, all swung into the void... Here's something to smile about: the other day, I said to myself that if I'd known my life was going to end like this, I wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to pass my A-levels...

- What if your life didn't end?
- I can't see a road.
- Another sees it for you.
- So I put my trust in Him.
- Doesn't his judgment frighten you?
- Not at all. I'm tired of being judged by men. It's like being constantly accused.
- And death?
- No more than that. The punishment would be to go on living.
- Do you think you've never sinned?
- What a question! Of course it is! As much as anyone.

Mostly pride... But tell me: aren't you confessing to me without my knowledge?

- Not at all," replies Oncieux's father. I respect your refusal.
- And I respect you too much not to speak frankly. Admitting one's faults is good; repenting of them is better. And then you start all over again. Even repentance isn't enough to kill the old man.

- Do you think you're in a state of grace?

I smile in spite of myself. The word "grace" makes me think invincibly of the Elysée Palace.

- Oh no, that would be presumptuous of me. As you know, in addition to the death penalty, my judges have sentenced me to indignity for life.

- Let's not play with words. Death is a terrible thing, because it

is irrevocable...

- Irrevocable, yes. Terrible, no. We living beings can only see one side of it: the side facing us. Neither you, Father, nor I, nor anyone else can say with certainty what lies behind it. Its hidden face remains impenetrable to us...

- It takes a leap of faith...

- Exactly: an act of faith. Because it's something we can't be sure of. The only man to have taken the plunge and come back was Lazarus. Jesus raised him from the dead. But Lazarus said nothing. Between his first death and his second, he lived for who knows how many years. Without saying a word. Don't you think that's extraordinary? There must have been no shortage of people to question him. Can you believe it? A man who had seen the dark side of death and remained mute? Not the slightest clue, not the slightest glimmer... Was it because there was nothing there, or because what he had seen was untranslatable in the language of men? So I said to myself: God in His omnipotence created everything, including the dark side of death. And He created everything according to His will, which, given His nature, can only tend towards the Good. For as long as mankind has existed, it has been debated without agreement. Is this not proof that the problem is beyond them? That it's not up to them, but to Him to decide. What lies beyond death? Eternal life or nothingness? I defer to His decision with absolute confidence because I know that whatever He decided, He could only choose what He knows is best. So in whatever way, I'm off to a better state. What would I care?

- As a priest, I can't share your point of view...

- It's not a point of view, it's an intimate conviction. To you, who are more versed in theology than I am, it may seem simplistic. But at this point in my life, I don't need complicated reasoning. I need simple things to help me die. Pascal's pan has never tempted me... You see, I'm speaking to you with complete frankness. I'm not a cheat...

And I add with a smile to lighten the mood:

"Anyway, I'll know where I stand before you do. That's one of the advantages of my situation. Unfortunately, I won't be able to come back and tell you. Unless you resurrect me! In that case, I swear to tell you everything. I'll "sit down to the table", as we say here.

- At any rate, I see that you've retained a certain sense of humor! Is it this... philosophical outlook that gives it to you?

- Yes. No. I don't know. But there's also this: in a book published in 1941, I wrote that, for me, freedom was not the latitude to choose everything oneself - even one's own misfortune. It lies in the ability to will *what must be*. To choose everything oneself is to detach the world from the great forces that govern it, and make oneself its master. To want "what ought to be" is to place oneself back in the cosmos and become its servant. This has always been my rule of conduct. You may not believe me, but what I'm about to tell you is true: when I went to Vichy for the first time, the day after I had been appointed Secretary General of the government, I stopped off at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. I had the crypt of the monastery opened to me and knelt before the shrine of the saint, to beg him to give me the inspiration and strength I needed to carry out my task. Good thing I found them today. Since things have taken the turn you know, since the denouement is near and my life is about to come to an end, it *must be so*. I must, therefore, want it too. Don't see in what I say any pride or boastfulness. I'm too close to my end to play with these things, and I know too well what it has cost me to reach this point. But thanks to this, death has lost all its terrifying character. It gives me the impression of accessing the very tip of my freedom. In my current situation, that's an invaluable blessing.

A brigadier opens the door and informs Father d'Oncieux that his visit is over.

- I'll be back to see you soon," he says. In the meantime, what can I do for you?

- Make wishes, Father, that I get to the final count before the final minute. And then, if you please, go and see my mother. Tell her that I will do my best to die in such a state of mind that it will no longer require any courage on my part, since what will be accomplished will not be the will of others, but mine. Repeat my words to him. I know they'll do him good.

The following days were difficult to get through. I continue my work of inner liberation. It's hard work, requiring constant vigilance. You have to close your eyes, clear your mind, stop thinking about anything and above all - ah! above all - put up an insurmountable barrier to memories, especially those too easily associated with the idea of happiness: a reading of Sophocles at dusk on the mauve-and-gold terrace of the Château de Chinon; cherry blossom and narcissus flows on the slopes of the Pléiades;

the shadows of the Val-de-Grâce full of intermingled voices, anything that might heighten my regret at leaving this world and oppose my desire to tear myself away from it. No matter how guarded I am, the memories always find a way to seep into me through some unnoticed crack. Nights, especially, are terrible, when the mind retreats to those in-between zones where vigilance slackens, the will weakens and thought gives way to the upwelling of memory. Nocturnal tides of which we are not the master, carrying with them submerged faces, music and gardens, which float, in the stream of consciousness, pale and undone like Ophelia's corpse... How hard it is to extricate from oneself all the ghosts of the past I

But it's not enough to abolish memory. It's also necessary to destroy hope, not to think about tomorrow, not to make any plans, because in a few days the thread of my duration will be severed in one fell swoop. There comes a time when the whole being revolts at the idea that it no longer has a future. At that point, you have to hold on to it like a frantic courier, until it calms down (with a little patience, it always does...).

Little by little, these jolts become less frequent. I master them as best I can. The great peace is approaching. A few more days and I'll be delivered...

And then, suddenly, everything is called into question...

-

On the evening of June 28, Hénard, the head warden, enters my cell. He turns a sheet of blue paper over and over between his fingers.

- You're going to be extracted tomorrow morning," he tells me. Be ready by 8 o'clock. A supervisor will pick you up.

- To take me where?

- In Versailles.

- Versailles?" I replied, dumbfounded.

- Yes. You must present yourself again to the High Court.

- There must be some mistake! The High Court is no longer in session. It's on vacation until Parliament reconvenes.

Hénard carefully rereads the sheet in his hand.

- No, it's not. That's right. The extraction order is formal.

It seems unbelievable to me. But I'm not dreaming. Why am I

being brought to Versailles? Is it to start my trial all over again? On the evening of June 6, feverish after six days of debates, I would have fervently hoped so. But not any more. Let me be left in peace. I'm already too far away, too detached from everything. If I'm questioned again, I'll keep silent.

A host of questions collide in my head. Extracting a death row inmate from his cell to bring him before his judges again is unprecedented in the judicial annals of this country. This can't be it. Is it my testimony that's needed for someone else's trial? That's not possible either. If magistrates need additional information, they never call a death row inmate before them. They set up a rogatory commission that comes to question him on the spot. How does this work?

I come up with a series of hypotheses. None of them stands up to scrutiny. There's something suspicious about this story.

Suddenly, an idea crosses my mind: the extraction order that reached Fresnes is a fake. It didn't come from the parking lot, but from a group of resistance fighters who "have deaths to avenge". Didn't one of the jurors proclaim this at the end of my trial? Fearing that Vincent Auriol would pardon me, they chose this means to shoot me on the way from Fresnes to Versailles. There's nothing implausible about it: it's already happened to several prisoners. As for my attackers, their task will be easy. I know the route. To get from Fresnes to Versailles, the prison car doesn't pass through Paris. It cuts short Châtenay-Malabry, Robinson, Verrières wood, Petit-Clamart and Meudon wood. All places where it's easy to set up an ambush. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that this is what awaits me.

The next morning, at 10 a.m., a brigadier came to pick me up and take me to the clerk's office. There I find my clothes hanging on the coat rack. I take off my habit and put on my suit. A difficulty arises when I have to put on my pants. It's impossible to do this without removing my chains. Once my pants are on, the checkroom attendant insists on putting them back on. I protest vehemently.

- You savages! You can't make me go out on the town like that!

The brigadier is puzzled. There's no precedent. There are no regulations governing the extraction of death row inmates, and for good reason. He goes to the director's office to get instructions. He's obviously afraid I'll take advantage of the situation to save

myself if he removes my restraints. Poor idiot. If he only knew how little I want to...

He returns after a moment, his face reassured.

- No, no, no, no. Orders are strict. I must hand them over to you.

I could get angry, do what I did with Babar. But I have a feeling I won't have the upper hand this time. Besides, I'm too tired to argue. A little more, a little less, who cares?

Not only does the brigadier screw the chains back on my ankles, he also handcuffs me. It's complete! This time, no ceremony. All I need is a nose ring to look like a circus bear. If the car is ever attacked, I won't be able to take a step to save myself, a gesture to defend myself.

The brigadier hands me over to a sixty-something supervisor with the wet eyes of a drunkard, all knotted up by thirty years of rheumatism and administrative morass. He takes me to a dilapidated little Simca, which starts off coughing with a clatter of scrap metal. Of course, the driver is younger and stronger. But the fact that I'm so lightly guarded confirms my apprehensions. My assailants must have accomplices inside the prison.

The car turns onto the Châtenay road. In spite of myself, I scan the roadside for a group with hostile intentions. This puts a tiring strain on my mind. Death could be lurking anywhere, in a doorway, at a crossroads.

Cahin-caha, the car continues on its way. We're approaching Robinson. If the attack is to take place, I think it will be somewhere less populated: the Villacoublay airfield, for example, through which the Nationale 186 runs, or the Verrières woods.

My attention slackens. As a result, something worse happens than the assault I was expecting. I thought I was going to be struck by death, but instead I'm assaulted by life.

The weather is radiant. It's midday (summer time) and Sunday. On this weekend, the streets are filled with a lively crowd. The sky is azure. Flowers are everywhere. Cyclists in brightly-colored jerseys whistle like birds past our car, happily calling out to each other. Young girls in bright dresses sip cool drinks on café terraces. Emerald-colored mint diabolos filled with ice cubes make my mouth water. We walk past a swimming pool where teenagers are sunbathing, or diving off a springboard doing trout jumps. My God, how cruel it all is! What diabolical refinement is it that passes

before my eyes all that is most delightful in life, all that I strive to forget so that I can tear myself away from it without too much regret? I'm well aware of the skin-deep sentimentality of these popular weekend scenes. They evoke *Ciboulette*, donkey rides and *Le Temps des Cerises*. But how can I remain indifferent to this popular gaiety, this sunshine, this youth from which I am separated only by the thickness of a pane of glass...

Alas, this glass is much thicker than those I meet can imagine. They have no idea that the man marching in front of them is condemned to death, that this sun and this youth no longer belong to him, that he is contemplating them for the last time. It's sweltering in my car, whose windows have been blocked for fear I'll jump out of the window. And I'm making sure that only my head and shoulders are visible. I smile back, hiding my hands and ankles so that no one notices I'm in chains...

We arrive in the woods of Verrières. For me, this is one of the most dangerous sections of the route. I redouble my attention. And then the car breaks down and refuses to start up again. That's the last straw! The driver gets out, grumbling, and lifts the hood. I can see nothing in front of me. If my attackers appear now, I won't even see them coming. My nervous tension is rising.

After a few minutes, the engine agrees to restart.

- This old jalopy is ready to be scrapped," remarks the driver.

A jolt. We're off again. The clutch makes a terrible noise. Impossible to shift into second gear. The temperature inside the car is like a furnace. I'm sweating profusely. I'm guessing that outside, the metal sheets must be scorching hot. There's no doubt about it: this year's wine is going to be good.

We arrive at Versailles. At the Royal Stables, the engine stops and refuses service.

- Shit, that's all I needed," exclaims the driver, mopping his brow.

The old overseer guarding me glances around in dismay. He turns to me and asks in a hoarse voice:

- Would you mind walking the rest of the way?

- There is no other solution.

- So let's get going.

I climb out of the car with difficulty and glance ahead. The Place d'Armes has never looked so large. I'll have to cross the Cour d'Honneur before reaching the left wing of the palace, where the High Court is located. It's not going to be easy.



I lead the way, followed by the ethylic overseer, whose eyes are full of water. My chains make an awful noise against the King's pavement. As we enter the main courtyard, we pass a column of tourists exiting the palace. Flemish or Dutch, I think. A woman, who noticed me first, points and shouts. All the tourists stare at me, making various comments. A woman calls her children to her side, as if to protect them. They all wonder who this chain-covered monster could be. It's true that this is the first time in history - if I'm not mistaken - that a former French minister has crossed the courtyard of the Palace of Versailles in this device. I can see the fear on their faces.

- Don't be afraid!<sup>1</sup> I shout to reassure them. It's nothing, really. Just a comedy rehearsal...

That's the truth. Yet I don't feel like laughing. Naturally, the tourists don't understand. Their cries redouble.

- Don't talk to people!" urges the supervisor. It's against the rules...

I glare at him.

- You moron! You're glad I agreed to follow you! If you bring her back again, I'll make a scene. I'm going to sit in the middle of the courtyard and never move from there.

He looks at me, appalled.

- You can't do this to me! I beg you, please... You'll ruin my career!

His career? What about mine? He gives me a pitiful look. Suddenly, my anger subsides. All I see is the burlesque of the situation. I raise both hands in the air, spread them as wide as my handcuffs will allow, shout to the tourists: "Bye- bye!" and continue walking towards the High Court. I wonder what they'll tell their families back in Amsterdam...

The inside of the palace seems exquisitely cool compared to the Saharan temperature outside. The offices are almost empty. A sleepy old clerk is startled to see me. The supervisor orders me to sit down on a moleskin-covered bench.

- Wait for me here," he says, "I'll see what we want. Don't move.

I stay a long time on my bench watching the flies fly. The wait gets longer. I hear the telephone ringing. After an hour, the supervisor returns.

- It's beyond comprehension," he says, rolling his water-filled eyes. Nobody summoned you. The High Court is on vacation. The clerk hasn't sent any order for extraction from Fresnes. He phoned Paris to

ask for instructions. This took some time, as the gentlemen were either in the country or having lunch. Finally, someone at the Chancellery told him that we didn't need you, we could just take you back to Fresnes. We'll be going back.

This time, there can be no doubt: the attack must have taken place on the way home.

Leaving the clerk of the High Court to drift off to sleep, I head for the exit. Once there, I realize that our car is parked in front of the door.

- There you go! Is she walking again?

- Yes, the spark plugs were dirty. I cleaned them. But even so, this old nightingale is about to give up the ghost.

I get into the car. I think I'm entering an oven, because it's been stationary for over an hour in the middle of the Place d'Armes, under a vertical sun. I'm about to feel sick. My ears are ringing. My temples are buzzing. I'm suddenly overcome by an inexplicable fatigue. And suddenly, everything around me takes on an unreal quality. I can't wait to get back to my cell.

Taking the same route in the opposite direction as on the outward journey, we pass through the Bois de Verrières, Villacoublay and Robinson. It's nearly 3 o'clock. The streets are much less busy than before. I no longer care about escaping a possible attack. Everything has become indifferent. In fact, nothing happens, and it's with a sense of relief that I return to the prison.

I take off my dress suit, put on my bure and head for my cell. To see no one. To be alone. To sleep. What could be better?

At that very moment, an awful scene unfolded that I didn't realize at the time.

Although my mother is no longer allowed to see me, she comes to Fresnes every day and prowls around the prison for hours on end to feel closer to me. Sometimes she brings me tobacco to take to the clerk's office. That morning, she arrived around 10:30 and asked about me. In reply, a warder said to her:

- He's gone. He was picked up this morning.

It's easy to imagine what she thought she understood. Why had this supervisor used this ambiguous formula? Out of sheer stupidity, or to see what effect it would have on her? How cruel to a woman approaching eighty! She almost got hurt and had to hold on to a grate to keep from falling to the ground. Taking pity on her at last, a brigadier said:

- He's gone to Versailles. He'll be back shortly. I'll bring you a seat. If you'd like to wait in the visiting room, I'll let you know when he returns. You can watch him go by.

That's all my mother wanted. But she was feeling a bit weak, having eaten nothing since the day before. Around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, she saw me appear. It was the first time she'd seen me in a monk's habit and loaded down with chains. She was gripped. Even more violent was the shock she felt at the look of my face. Not only had I lost several kilos, but I looked haggard and my face was the color of ashes. In a flash, she said to herself: "All the letters he writes me, in which he tells me he's well and in good spirits, are nothing but pious lies! He's in the worst shape of his life..." She'd wanted to move towards me, to get my attention, but had remained frozen in place. She'd held out her arms, wanted to call out to me, but no sound would leave her lips. I'd walked past her without seeing her, without hearing her, leaving her with her arms outstretched in the void. If I'd known she was there, nothing in the world would have stopped me from kissing her. But I saw nothing. As if walled up inside myself, obsessed by the sole idea of finding my cell, I passed by her, my face gray, my features drawn, and disappeared at the end of the gallery leading to death row...

Unaware that I've just passed my mother, I enter my cell with the feeling of being at home again. It's strange how tired I've been all day! The sun, perhaps? My ears are ringing and I feel dizzy. I feel exhausted. I can't stand it any longer, so I slump down on my bench without even undressing and fall into a lightning-striped sleep, like driving into a thunderstorm.

\*

The next day, when I wake up, I don't know where I am. It takes me a long time to find myself. Ah, yes, I remember. Fresnes. The special section. I'm shaking with chills. How come I'm dressed? My whole body aches. Especially my ankles, which are swollen and bruised. I can hardly swallow. What I discover fills me with panic. My neck is swollen My jaws are locked. I can't open them, I can't drink, I can't say a word. What will become of me? I try to get up to alert the supervisor by banging on the door, but my legs refuse to carry me. I fall back onto my bench. What time can it be? Probably very early, as it's barely daylight. I have to wait for someone to take a

look inside my cell and see how I'm doing. I try to go back to sleep, but I'm prevented from doing so by a dull, throbbing pain that gnaws at my right jaw. Through my ringing ears, which fill my head with a continuous shrillness akin to the shriek of a thousand alarm bells, I hear the prison waking up, footsteps, the rumble of the carriage on the corridor rails, the sound of doors being opened and closed. Someone opens my peephole and places a quart of juice on the inside board. I try to get his attention. It's no use. The peephole closes again. I hear his footsteps moving away.

Hours go by. The sun has risen. A round at last. The window opens. I make insane efforts to signal to the guard, but bound by my chains I can barely move. Since I can't call out to him either, as only a hoarse groan comes from my locked jaws, he thinks I'm asleep. The peephole closes. How long am I going to stay like this? I'm going to die like an animal without anyone noticing. What a pitiful end! To die? I was ready to. Provided I died on my feet, with a clear mind. But to die in this pasty state? They'll have to carry me out on a stretcher, because I won't be able to stand up. Really, what have I done to deserve this disgrace?...

At last the door opens. It's the mailman. He's bringing me a letter. A letter from my mother. He hands it to me absent-mindedly, saying hello. When I don't reply and just point to my jaws with my hands, he widens his eyes. Perhaps he thinks I've gone mad? He quickly slips away, as if frightened.

I turn my mother's letter over and over. It's not stamped. She must have delivered it herself. I unseal the envelope and pull out a small sheet of squared paper. I recognize her handwriting. But the words dance before my eyes. Through a sort of fog, I manage to decipher :

*I saw you go by. You look terrible. I'm afraid you're  
ill. I've told Marcel Héraud. Give me your  
news, but tell me the truth. Don't worry. All will be well.*

How could she have guessed? Nobody knows anything yet. But she already knows everything. How well she watches over me! I have the sweetest feeling. She did the right thing. I admire her presence of mind. And then I sink again into a kind of torpor where I lose track of time.

At one point I thought I heard the barker's voice shouting:

- Benoist-Méchin, to the lawyer!

I should have gone to the little death row parlor. But it's materially impossible. No matter. Contact has been re-established. Now, one

way or another, something's going to happen.

A quarter of an hour later, a brigadier enters my cell. He sees me slumped over on my bench, feels my pulse and leaves without saying a word.

More time passes. The sun declines. Now I feel a kind of serenity that I didn't have before. Is it the approach of the end?...

An intern enters, wearing a white coat. He is followed by the deputy director and the head supervisor. He takes my temperature and frowns: 40.7. He feels my neck and tries to loosen my jaws. To no avail. Then he turns to the assistant manager and says:

- It's a wisdom tooth accident. Trismus. Throat phlegmon. Probably the beginnings of septicemia...

- Is it serious?" asks the assistant manager.

The intern nods.

- How long do you think it will last?

- Forty-eight hours at most.

They speak loudly, as if I wasn't there. They probably think I can't hear them. But I can hear everything they're saying perfectly clearly. The three men look bored. The assistant manager scratches his forehead.

- It's annoying," he says, turning to the head supervisor. The intern says he's only got forty-eight hours. We won't even have time to...

I don't pay attention to what they say anymore. I'm no longer interested. The three men must have retreated without me noticing, because now I can't hear a thing. I say to myself:

- Here you are. Few men have been sunk so deeply into death. If you get out of it - which would be miraculous - it'll be to torture. So, no way out. You were right not to delude yourself.

An idea comes to me that makes me smile. I'm going to escape them, slip through their fingers I'm going to beat the firing squad. By the time they come for me, there'll be no one left. I can see their faces from here.

And then it's all foggy again.

When I open my eyes again, it's dark. I hear the voices of inmates calling to each other through the bars of their windows. I recognize Bassompierre's voice. He's telling I don't know who about his battles on the Eastern Front. I'd be wrong to complain. Those who went there suffered more than I did.

Besides, I'm not in pain. Or to be more precise, there's one pain

inside me that dominates all the others: thirst. I haven't had a drink for twenty-four hours now. I experienced hunger in Voves in 1940. But it's not the same thing. Hunger makes you drowsy, but thirst grips you. Drink, drink, I have to drink at all costs. It becomes an obsession. I roll off my board and end up on the floor. I crawl to the little copper tap over the toilet bowl and run water over my hands. It feels good. But when I collect it in my palms and bring it to my mouth, not a drop makes it past my jaws. I can barely moisten my lips, which are beginning to chafe. Even if I could shout for a glass of water, and even if someone brought it to me, it wouldn't do me any good. I couldn't swallow it. Even though I'm surrounded by thousands of men, they can't help me. I'm going to die of thirst, in my cell on the first floor, like a traveler lost in the solitude of the desert.

The next day, July 1<sup>er</sup>, my fever seems to have broken a little. But my right cheek is swollen and the lump in my neck has grown considerably. I can't believe it's my birthday!

In the evening, an intern - not the one who came to visit me the day before - enters my cell.

- We'll try to operate on you later," he says gravely, placing his stethoscope against my chest.

My eyes widen. This unexpected solicitude seems suspicious. Ever since my trip to Versailles, I've been suspicious of everything. I'd like to ask him a few questions first. But I can't. Yet I must talk to her. So an idea comes to me, so simple that I'm angry I didn't think of it sooner. I pick up my pen and a sheet of paper, on which I scribble: "Who gave the order?"

- The Ministry of Justice," he replies. And as I look astonished, he adds:

- I received a phone call this afternoon from<sup>e</sup> Jacqueline Marson, Marcel Héraud's secretary. The President of the Bar came to see you yesterday. But he was told you were too ill to leave your cell. He asked the management about your condition. When he heard about your condition, he rushed to the Chancellery. He made a terrible fuss. "That you apply the decisions of the courts is your role. But that doesn't give you the right to let a convict die for lack of care. I'm going back to Fresnes tomorrow. If nothing has been done by then, you'll hear from me. Mr<sup>e</sup> Marson has asked me to pass on his affectionate regards.

These are things you don't forget. But how long will I have to remember them?

- Where will I be operated on? Here, in my cell?
- Oh no. In the operating room of the central hospital.

Having spent some time there before my trial, I know roughly where it is.

- When? This very evening?
- The intern consults his watch.
- It's 9 o'clock. Probably around midnight.
  - Why the wait?

The intern looks embarrassed. He explains that it's unclear whether my case falls under stomatology, otorhinolaryngology or general surgery. But the head surgeon, Dr. Masmonteil, is on vacation. When questioned, the dentist refused to take on this responsibility. That leaves the ENT specialist. But he's not at home. He's dining in town with friends. We have to wait to contact him until he has returned home.

- Do you think you can walk to the hospital? If not, we can take you there on a stretcher.

- I'd rather make an effort. I'll walk.

- Then please follow me. We'll wait there for the practitioner.

We leave the cell and slowly follow the central gallery. I pass by the gate my mother is clinging to. Then, accompanied by a guard, we leave the prison and turn left. It's about eight hundred meters along a tree-lined, grassy driveway. I didn't remember it being so long. I don't know if I'll make it, with my fever, my thirst, my locked jaws and my chains. All this is heavy to drag along. At times, vertigo makes me stagger. But I make it.

We enter the operating room. It's empty. We haven't been able to reach the doctor yet. I'm made to sit in the anteroom until he arrives. An interminable wait! If only I could drink...

Around 1 a.m., the doctor arrives. He's full of gaiety. His ruddy face is that of a merry man. He seems to have some difficulty keeping his balance, but I could be wrong. Of course, he couldn't have known when he left for dinner that he'd be called to an emergency in the middle of the night. As he goes to wash his hands and put on his white coat, I feel a certain trepidation at the idea of putting myself in his hands. But now it's too late to turn back. Ah, if I could speak...

- Take off your jacket and lie down on the pool table," says the doctor, as he opens a box of compresses.

With a gesture, I point to my chains.

- Keep them," he says. They won't get in my way.

The attendant gives him a grateful look. He's probably afraid I'll escape during the operation...

I pull myself up onto the pool table with the help of the intern. It's not easy at all. Finally, I manage it. I lie down on my back. At the same time, a large parabolic spotlight lights up above my head. The doctor lowers it and shines it in my face. I'm literally blinded. When I close my eyelids, I see an orange glow, and when I open them, I'm hit by a blast of light. We really could have waited until I was asleep to turn it on. I clench my fists and tell myself that in a few minutes I won't be able to see him anymore...

I hear a metallic noise: it's pliers and forceps being placed on a glass board. Then I hear a sentence that sends a chill down my spine.

- Local or general anesthesia? asks the intern.

- No, no, no, no! It's useless... At this point...

A voice inside me cries out: Dominique Larrey, help me! You, who cut off so many arms and legs without anaesthetic, and who were renowned for your dexterity, make sure he's quick!

- Open your mouth wide!" said the doctor.

With a helpless gesture, I let him know that I can't do it.

- Ha, ha! he says. Trismus?

I nod. How did we not warn him?

- It's going to be more complicated.

He moves away from the table for a moment and returns with a strange instrument that he pushes between my gums and the inside wall of my cheeks. He spreads the blades by turning a ferrule, to keep my lips as wide open as possible. The pain is excruciating. I cling to the table. I feel as if my lips, already chapped with thirst, are going to tear. Then he grabs a cold chisel in one hand, a hammer in the other, and sets about knocking out the visible part of my diseased tooth. Each hammer blow sounds like a cannon in my head.

He'd better hurry! He'd better hurry... Suddenly something snaps: my jawbone cracks.

- It's not the tooth yet," says the doctor, "but it's starting to come in...

He'd better hurry! Let him hurry... I can't think of anything else. Another crack. This time, it's the tooth. The knocking stops. The doctor puts down his chisel and hammer. He takes a pair of pliers and delicately extracts a small, irregular cube, yellowed by nicotine, from my mouth. Ten more seconds and I'd have fainted.



The doctor takes a small convex mirror and examines my jaw.

- I'm fine," he says. Obviously, I couldn't extract the root. Your jaws are too tight. That's for another time.

Another time? Good heavens!

The doctor removes the stent he placed in my mouth. My lips return to their normal position. They are not torn. But a trickle of blood runs down my throat. The intern helps me to my feet. Then he goes to the sink, takes a glass, fills it with water and hands it to me.

- Rinse out your mouth.

More water! I almost snatch the glass out of her hand. I don't rinse it out: I swallow it whole, sip by sip. The water passes through the narrow gap opened in my teeth by the extraction of my molar. It's divine! I beckon the intern to give me another.

- That's no good. You swallow your blood at the same time. You risk aggravating the infection.

No good? He doesn't know what he's saying! And as for swallowing a little blood, what does it matter? At this point, as the doctor says...

I drink a second, then a third glass of water. I feel like I'm coming back to life.

- I didn't take my eyes off you during the whole operation. You held up very well. Congratulations! Cigarillo?

It's not to be refused. I place it between my lips. The intern gives me fire. I take a few puffs. Then I look for the doctor. He slips away without saying goodbye. I like that.

- Now it's time to go home," says the supervisor, who doesn't have Pair at his ease.

I get off the billiard table and put on my vest. My head is spinning. My chains feel much heavier than they did on the way in. We leave the infirmary and enter the tree-lined alley leading to the prison. Eight hundred meters to walk, before returning to my cell! I can't make it this time. I'm staggering. But I've got to, I've got to... One last effort. After that, nothing will matter.

It's 2 a.m. The air is light. The sky is full of stars. It must have rained during the evening, because I can make out a smell of wet greenery that I haven't perceived for a long time. I shackle myself and slump onto the gravel. The warden makes no move to help me up. Hurry up!" he says. It's getting late. I don't want to have to work overtime because of you! I manage, as best I can, to get back on my feet. The supervisor is getting more and more nervous. He can't wait

to see me behind bars. A death row inmate is capable of anything. He doesn't see himself alone in the night, with me in his arms. I trudge on for another hundred meters. But I can't take it anymore. I stop and lean against a tree trunk to catch my breath. I'll never make it the rest of the way! Frightened, the warden takes me by the arm and, supported by him, I finally cross the threshold of my cell. Once there, I collapsed on my bench and lost consciousness.

When I come to, my cell is splattered with blood. My jacket, mattress and duffel bag are soaked. It's all over the wall, the floor and the ceiling. I must have struggled furiously through the night without noticing.

I sink back into unconsciousness. What happened next, I don't know...

When I regain consciousness, I feel as if I'm floating between two worlds. Then I open my eyes. I'm in a small, white-painted room with a ray of sunlight streaming through it. I'm lying in a clean bed with sheets. My chains have been removed. What's happened? After a few seconds, I realize that my arms and legs are connected by rubber hoses to jars of serum hanging from the four corners of my ht. A nun enters. Isn't that Sister Sainte-Claire? Yes, it is. What's she doing here? She smiles. And suddenly I understand: I'm no longer on death row. I've been transferred to the central hospital.

- I've just given you your injection," she says. You've come a long way!

- What happened?

- You suffered a severe hemorrhage following the extraction of your wisdom tooth. You had a narrow escape. You were found the next morning, bathed in blood. The haemorrhage could have killed you, but it saved you. It allowed the pus to drain and brought down the fever. You were brought here on a stretcher.

- I don't remember a thing...

- You couldn't, you were in a coma. Now it's getting better. I gave you a course of sulfonamide right away, which stopped the septicemia...

- And these pipes?

At this point, I realize that my jaws have loosened a little. It's still not ideal, but I'm able to say a few words.

- As you couldn't swallow anything because of the trismus, we put you on a drip. We fed and watered you by drip.

Do I need water? It's true: I'm hardly thirsty anymore! That's one less torment...

I smile at Sister Sainte-Claire. She's an admirable soul. Among the nuns who look after us here, I know two in particular: she and Sister Philippe-de-Néri. Although they wear the same costume, they are very different. Sister Philippe-de-Néri, with her white cornette and heavy pleated dress, looks like a painting by Philippe de Champaigne. Although in her sixties, she's as robust as a tower. Sister Sainte-Claire, on the other hand, is slender and sensitive. Everything about her testifies to a deep knowledge of the world. Some inmates in search of romance claim that she is a countess and that she took the veil following a heartbreak. In other words, she is held in high esteem. Without believing this fable, I can see that she is a great lady. I admire the fact that she gave up everything to voluntarily choose the life of a recluse, because she pretty much leads the same life as the rest of us. When she's old, she'll be able to say that, although she was never convicted, she spent most of her life in prison. Her whole life! There's something over the top about such dedication. She trots the corridors of the infirmary all day long, never complaining, a bunch of keys dangling from her belt. Like Saint Peter, she has the power to bind and unbind (I later learned that it was she who demanded that my chains be removed). The role of the prison medical service is not to cure us, to prevent us from suffering. It's to prevent us from escaping our executioners. Sister Sainte-Claire, on the other hand, cares for us for quite different reasons: she wants to bring a little dignity to each of us, in our hour of greatest distress. No one is ever so degraded, in her eyes, as not to deserve a little love. If he has to go, she wants him to take a ray of it into his heart. It's a wonder such people exist on earth...

As soon as I'm feeling a bit better, I ask her - not about her, because she wouldn't answer me - but about something that's on my mind.

- Tell me, Sister Sainte-Claire, what happened on the morning of June 29, when I was taken from my cell to Versailles? I didn't understand a word of it...

- I'll find out.

She returns the next day, clearly amused.

- It's incredible," she says. The first hearing in your trial took place

on May 29. So there was an extraction order for that day. And then, a secretary at the clerk's office mistyped the page in the register. He re-entered the same extraction order a second time on June 29.

- Is that all?

- That's all there is to it.

Now I understand why nothing happened, either on the way there or on the way back. There was no plot to bring me down. Just an oversight on the part of the clerk. It's all in the balance...

Over the next few days, my condition improved significantly. The sepsis is under control. My jaws loosen. The needles and drip tubes are removed. All I feel is a dull pain in my lower jaw.

"You've come a long way," Sister St. Clare told me. And she's right. But I've come a long way to go even farther. Now I have to prepare myself to face the fire of the peloton. People will think I'm rambling. But what does this return to life mean to me? "Death, death again and again? Let's hope this time it's the last.

In fact, I'm in the best possible shape for the final round. Admittedly, I'm still very weak. But I feel lighter, purified, almost rejuvenated. My accident was a real catharsis for me. It has transfigured me. The noise of the world now only reaches me like the rumor of a receding ocean.

The cell I'm in is bright, white and bare. It's the ideal place for me to concentrate, empty myself and let go of everything. My mind acquires a transparency I've never known before. With each passing day, I'm decanted and lightened. Nothing weighs on my shoulders any more: neither the weight of life, nor the weight of my sorrow. *O you whose boat is small...* Mine is not very big, but it seems immense to me, for I have reached the high seas where I am surrounded on all sides by an unlimited horizon. I float between two worlds: the ocean and the sky. But these are not, as before, worlds steeped in darkness. They are worlds that, hour by hour, fill with greater clarity.

One evening, when I'm in a state of perfect euphoria, I lean against the bars of my window to contemplate the night. What peace... So many stars! Suddenly, I think I hear distant music. I must be mistaken... No, it's music all right... It's coming back. Suddenly, I recognize it: it's the overture *to Coriolan*! I close my eyes to hear it better, because I know it's for me.

Two days before the opening of my trial in Versailles. Jean-Louis Delebecque, a young intern from the infirmary with whom I had forged one of those friendships that are born all the more quickly when circumstances are more exceptional, came to see me in my cell to tell me:

- Is there anything you need or want to treat yourself to? A bottle of cognac, a box of Nescafé?

- Thank you," I replied, "I don't need anything. The only thing I need that would do me good is a bit of music. Alas, that's out of the question...

The next day, in the middle of the night, Jean-Louis and three of his comrades, who had managed to get hold of a spring-loaded record player, had come to the covered walkway and played the *Coriolan* overture under my window. It was with my head still full of Beethovenian chords that I went to Versailles the next morning, to answer my judges' questions.

This time, Jean-Louis couldn't get through to me, as I'm well guarded. But as he wants me to understand that he's thinking of me and that he knows - since I've told him - what would please me most, he plays the overture to *Coriolan* a second time under my window. This attention fills me with joy. But at the same time it tells me that the decisive moment is just around the corner, that my lawyers have been received by the President of the Republic.

I move closer to my window, the better to absorb the powerful melody rising in the night. God, how things take on an incomparable flavor when you know you're hearing them for the last time! I know that Jean-Louis and his comrades are lurking somewhere in the shadows, where I can't make them out. But maybe they can see me, because my lighted window cuts a bright rectangle in the night. I reach out through my bars to greet them.

This salute is a final farewell. A farewell to everything. I know that from now on every dawn can be *the right one*. Let it come! I'll welcome it as such. I've reached the level of detachment I was hoping for. People think I'm going away, but here I come! I no longer fear the firing squad. Their bullets will pierce me. They won't reach me anymore. What falls to the grass will be an empty shell...

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On the maid\* August 4, 1947, at 10 a.m., a supervisor came to

fetch me.

- Put on your jacket," he said.
- Where are you taking me?
- Director's office. Just a formality.

Another one! When am I going to be left alone?

There have been times in my life when my mind has been absent. It was nothing compared to what I feel today. I'm separated from everything by an immeasurable distance. I can't even feel the weight of my body. I float in a kind of moral weightlessness where nothing can touch me.

I enter the manager's office. At first, all I see is a man with greying hair. His face is friendly, warm even. He introduces himself to me:

- Léon Hollebecque, General Secretary of the High Court.
- What do you want from me?

- I am pleased to announce that Mr. Vincent Auriol, President of the Republic, has pardoned you by decree dated July 30, 1947, and commuted your sentence to hard labor for life. Please sign here.

His face lights up with a broad smile.

For me, it's a terrible blow. At the very moment he utters these words, I feel - physically - the weight of life falling on my shoulders. All the work I've done on myself since the moment a drum roll sounded in the congress hall is shattered. In a split second, a whirlwind of thoughts goes through my head. We're going to have to live, suffer, plan, assume responsibility... Worse still, I'm going to have to wrestle with the taint, turpitudes and lies of our age, reintegrate myself into a world from which I'd freed myself. What cruelty! I don't understand how the Secretary General can smile when he comes to tell me that I'll spend the rest of my life in prison. It's as if he thinks he's telling me good news, when in fact he's come to snatch from me that supreme good so dearly won: the right not to exist. I want to scream, to protest, to bang my head against the walls. Life has never inflicted such an insult on me.

- Aren't you going to say anything?" he asks me in surprise.

What does he want me to tell him? The world has never seemed so cruel, so absurd. I'm furious. If I could do it, I'd kill myself. I look around to see if there's a piece of rope, a sharp instrument, anything I can use to end my life.

Suddenly, I see my mother. She's sitting modestly in the background, not saying a word, half hidden by the door.

- I brought your mother with me so she could share in your joy.

She was wonderful!

Now I understand why Mr Hollebecque is smiling.

I look at my mother. Her eyes glow with something I can't describe.

She gets up, walks over to me and falls into my arms...

I don't know where I stand anymore.

Love, with a cry, brings me back down to earth.